

Sight Unseen

McKay



Chapter 1

Remus handled the loss of his eyesight reasonably well until he realized it meant he would never read again.

The Healer had been kind, holding his hand and speaking in a gentle voice as she broke the news. In the three days since he'd regained consciousness, Remus had been hopeful that the blindness was merely a side-effect of being grazed by the Killing Curse, one that would wear off eventually, and the Healers who examined him had told him to hope for the best but prepare for the worst, just in case. In hindsight, he supposed he should have realized the truth then, but he hadn't wanted to accept it.

That was the day his spirit had been broken. It wasn't the doubts about where he would go once he was released from St. Mungo's or how he would make a living - a werewolf *and* blind - or how he would adjust to living without sight that brought down the crushing weight of despair. It was the loss of the one constant joy of his life: words on a page, the weight of a book in his hand, the feel of the paper slick and smooth beneath his fingertips. When all else around him crumbled, his books were there; they had nursed him through countless dark nights, offering him a respite and giving him an escape if only for a few hours. But they couldn't help him this time. His only true, lasting friends were lost to him along with everything else, including his son.

Andromeda had come to his hospital room with a Ministry official in tow and announced that she thought it was in Teddy's best interests if Remus relinquished primary custody to her. "How can you take care of him now?" she had pointed out, and Remus had been unable to think of a convincing argument when he had no idea where he would live or how he would support himself and a child once he was released.

Agreeing with her and resorting to begging her to promise she would bring Teddy by for regular visits had been one of the most difficult, painful things Remus had ever done, and after she left, he felt as if he'd been hollowed out and left empty inside.

"You're lucky to be alive," the Healers had told him, although he wasn't certain he agreed anymore. When he had first woken up, he had considered himself lucky, especially when he learned he had been mistaken for dead at first. Someone had seen the Killing Curse flash past him and assumed he'd been killed along with Tonks when he collapsed, but he had only been brushed by the barest edge of it, and the last thing he remembered seeing was a flash of sickly green before everything went dark.

"Muggles have books in Braille," Hermione had told him in an obvious effort to offer him some hope. "It's an alphabet made of raised dots on a page, and you learn which configuration of dots represent which letter, and you read by touch."

It had been a nice thought, but he would have to learn Braille first, and normal books were expensive enough, a rarely indulged luxury for someone like him. He had built up his small library slowly over the course of decades, and he possessed only a fraction of the books he wanted. But now the cherished volumes he did have were useless, and he would have to start from scratch if he learned Braille. He wasn't even certain there *were* magical texts available in Braille; he might be limited to Muggle books.

Thus he had sunk deeper into depression while he waited for the Healers to decide he was strong enough to be discharged, unable to distract himself by escaping in the world of a novel as he used to do. He had no visitors other than Harry and sometimes Hermione, which didn't help; he had no distractions from his own thoughts, which grew steadily darker with each day that passed. Harry continued to visit, however, which was both gratifying and surprising, considering their quarrel, but he suspected Harry wanted to hang on to his one remaining connection to James, Lily, and Sirius.

"You haven't touched your supper," Harry said, a reproachful note in his voice.

Remus felt the bed shift under the addition of Harry's weight at the foot, and he could hear Harry's breathing, slow and even. Already his other senses had grown more acute to compensate, or perhaps he was simply more aware of their input now that one avenue was denied him. Whatever the reason, he could hear things he'd never noticed before. At first, this phenomenon had fascinated him, but now he didn't care.

"You have to eat," Harry added.

"Why?"

"Well..." Harry floundered, as if he hadn't expected Remus to question the assertion; normal people didn't, after all. "You'll starve, and I know you don't want that, not really. You're a fighter, Professor." He paused, and Remus heard the uncertainty in his voice as he corrected himself. "Remus."

It was the first time Harry had ever addressed him by name. Remus had given him permission some time ago; he was no longer Harry's teacher, and they were fighting as equals, but Harry had continued to call him "Professor Lupin". Remus assumed it was because Harry didn't want the intimacy that first names implied.

"Look, if you're worried about what's going to happen after you get out of the hospital, you

needn't." Harry's voice was firmer now, regaining its strength and conviction. "You're coming back to Grimmauld Place with me. The house is big enough for the both of us, and Sirius would have wanted it this way. I know he wouldn't have wanted you to be alone, even if this hadn't happened."

Remus didn't know any such thing. In his will, Sirius had left everything to Harry, and that made Sirius' priorities perfectly clear to Remus. Remus had left when Harry returned to school to begin his sixth year at Hogwarts, and he returned only when he was summoned there for meetings of the Order. During one of her visits, Hermione had mentioned that the house had been cleaned out from top to bottom so there were no more lurking dangers, and she'd sounded pleased when she informed him that the portrait of Mrs. Black had been removed, but other than that, he didn't know what changes Harry had made, nor did he particularly care.

"I don't want your charity, Harry." Remus' own voice was dull and lifeless - a reflection of how he felt. He didn't even bother turning his head in the direction of Harry's voice; he simply lay on his back, his sightless eyes open as if he were staring at the ceiling.

"It isn't charity," Harry insisted. "I'll give you a job if it makes you feel better. It'll be an arrangement just between you and me, so you won't get in trouble with the Ministry until Kingsley Shacklebolt gets those stupid laws repealed."

"A job doing what?" Remus gave a bitter chuckle. "A bit of light cleaning? Gardening every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday? Or perhaps you want me to try my hand in the kitchen, preparing meals."

"Actually, I was thinking something more along the lines of you looking after the house for me." He paused, and his next words contained the hint of a stutter, as if he realized how foolish asking Remus to *look* after anything had been. "You know what I mean. I won't be around much once I begin working, and even if being an Auror isn't as time-consuming as everyone's told me, I don't have any experience with running my own household. I've always had Aunt Petunia or Mrs. Weasley to do it for me."

"House-elves don't need to be supervised."

"I'm not going to have house-elves. I'm hiring a couple of people to cook and clean and stuff. They're not much older than me, and they lost their parents, their home - everything - in the war."

Remus almost smiled at that. Harry the philanthropist, taking a bunch of needy, helpless strays under his wing. Albus would have been proud.

"I don't suppose I have much of a choice," Remus said, and the bitterness wasn't quite gone from his voice.

"You could say no and be on the streets within a month after you leave here. It's not an appealing option as far as I'm concerned, but it *is* an option, if you can't get over your pride and accept an offer of help."

It isn't pride, he wanted to say. His refusal to remain in the house just after Sirius' death had indeed been born of stubborn pride. Now, however, he didn't care; if he ended up on the streets, he wouldn't live through the winter, and that wasn't an unpleasant thought, although he knew it should have been. But there was still a part of him that fought for life as hard as it ever did, and it was that part of him that answered.

"Yes. All right."

"Brilliant." He could hear the smile in Harry's voice, and he felt the mattress shift beneath him again as Harry stood up. "The healers said you can leave in the morning. I'll be back then."

Leave, Remus thought. *Not go home*. Remus was aware of the crucial difference, even if Harry was not. Still, he didn't protest when Harry came to collect him the next morning. When asked, he told Harry where to collect the rest of his belongings, and Harry promised they would be picked up and delivered to Grimmauld Place; then he had awkwardly offered Remus his arm to lead him out.

When Remus' luggage arrived the next day, Harry brought it to his room along with a cane that was charmed to give a sudden jerk in a safe direction if it detected any obstacles within a certain distance in front or on either side of him. "So you don't have to rely on someone else when you want to walk around," Harry explained.

So no one will have to touch you to help you. Harry didn't say that, but he didn't have to. Remus knew it. People didn't like touching werewolves if they could help it; he'd learned that the hard way, and so he used the cane as he began relearning the layout of the house all over again.

It was seven steps from the bottom of the stairs to the door of the kitchen. It was fifteen steps from the top of the third floor landing to his bedroom door. There was a heavy decorative urn in the corridor that he stubbed his toe on during the night if he went to the loo unless he remembered to take his cane or stay away from the wall on the left. The parlor always smelled of citrus just after Lizzie cleaned. The library smelled of paper, dust, and old leather. The wood on the banister was

slicker near the posts where the finish hadn't been worn by the slide of countless hands.

Lizzie and Ethan had been warned not to move anything around, which helped. Everything had to stay in the same place so Remus wouldn't get hurt, Harry told them, and they complied. They knew what Remus was. Harry had told them that as well, and their acceptance of being the underlings of a werewolf was part of the job package.

Lizzie was a former Hufflepuff and diligent enough that she didn't need prompting about her tasks. Ethan, a former Ravenclaw, sometimes let himself be distracted by the library, but Harry had given him permission to read anything he liked since the dangerous texts had long since been removed from the house. Remus envied him.

Harry was anxious and restless while he waited to hear whether he would be accepted in the Auror Department despite having skipped his entire Seventh Years and not taken his NEWTs, although Remus suspected the application process was a mere formality, even if Harry wasn't so certain. Ron, who had also applied, was just as impatient, and the two of them, along with Ginny and Hermione, were frequently away in search of distractions. Harry often said they needed to enjoy themselves while they could, since they wouldn't have time for fun once they began working. In Harry's absence, Ethan and Lizzie reported directly to Remus, although once they learned the routine of the household, he didn't have much to do. He couldn't manage the accounts, he couldn't write up grocery lists, he couldn't take care of Harry's non-personal correspondence - which, according to Harry, consisted mostly of requests for money and proposals of marriage - and he couldn't take stock of the larder. He couldn't do much of anything except ask if Ethan had checked the woodpile and if Lizzie had aired the guest bedrooms that week.

Neither of them seemed to mind; Remus imagined they were too grateful to have a roof over their heads to protest having to answer to him, and he heard sympathy underlying their voices whenever they spoke in his presence. *How could a blind werewolf present any real danger, after all?* he thought. They weren't afraid of him; they pitied him, seeing in him someone worse off than they were themselves. They knew as well as he did that his position was for show; he wasn't contributing anything, and he wasn't needed. They all helped sustain the illusion so Remus could lie to himself and say he was earning his keep.

At first, learning his way around the house had provided a distraction, but after a while, he knew where everything was, and depression crept up on him again. There was little to occupy his time until a week before Remus' first transformation after leaving St. Mungo's, when Severus arrived bearing a dose of the Wolfsbane potion.

"So this is where you've been holed up." Severus' voice was different now - rougher, raspier, and less mellifluous in the aftermath of nearly having his throat torn out - but his tone was as scathing as ever as he set the goblet down on the table in front of Remus. "Back to being a hanger-on, I see."

"Do you need anything else, Mr. Lupin?" Lizzie asked, her tone suspicious, and Remus smiled slightly, imagining her looking askance at Severus for haranguing him.

"Severus, would you like some tea?" Remus asked, inching his fingers along the top of the table as he searched for the goblet slowly, not wanting to knock it over.

"No."

"That will be all, then, Lizzie. Thank you." His fingertips bumped against the base of the goblet, and he slid them up the stem until he had a firm grip on it. He heard Lizzie give a little disapproving huff as she left them alone together, and his smile widened as he lifted the goblet to his lips. The acrid tang of the potion was even more potent now, and he held his breath before swallowing it in one gulp, unable to keep from grimacing at the taste.

"You could have just asked me to hand it to you," Severus said.

"It didn't occur to me." Remus set the goblet back on the table and pushed it towards Severus. "Thank you for bringing it."

"I heard what happened to you."

"The injury?"

"No, that you were working for Potter." Even if his hearing hadn't become more acute, Remus would have heard the quotation marks around "working".

"Harry was kind enough to give me a place to stay and something to do," Remus said. "I'm very grateful to him for that."

"Liar."

Remus turned his head as if he were looking at Severus, one eyebrow raised in surprise. "Excuse

me?"

"You're feeding me the party line, Lupin, and I don't believe you. You're miserable - and I'm glad. It's about damned time one of you golden boys learned how it feels to live trapped in servitude under the weight of a debt you never wanted to owe and can never repay."

"I'm aware that my job here is nothing more than an illusion to preserve some small amount of my dignity," Remus said, keeping his voice calm and quiet. "I don't need you to point it out to me."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Because there wasn't an acceptable alternative. If Harry hadn't allowed me to stay here, I don't know what would have become of me, and I wasn't ready to give up and die."

"Are you now?"

"Are you?"

"My lot has improved," Severus retorted sharply. "I'm still alive, for starters, and I'm free of both the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. On top of that, I've been hired to teach at Hogwarts again, I received an Order of Merlin first class, and I still have all of my faculties intact."

"Congratulations. All that, *and* you outlived all your old enemies except me, and I've ended up like this. May it put to rest some of those demons that have been riding you all these years. I would say 'how the mighty have fallen', but you and I both know I didn't have that far to go anyway." Remus was able to keep the edge out of his voice, but only just. Reaching for his cane, he closed his fingers around it and rose to his feet, careful not to bump into the table. "If you'll excuse me, it's time to pretend I have something useful to do. You don't need me to show you out, I'm sure."

He made his way up to his room and closed the door, leaning his forehead against it as he collected himself. Before, he would have gone straight to his bookshelves and chosen something to lose himself in for a few hours until the churning in his stomach subsided and he felt composed again. With that avenue closed to him, he was left with nothing to soothe his restless mind, and he paced for a few minutes before opening the window and forcing himself to sit still and listen to the world outside.

He could hear car engines as Muggles drove by, and off in the distance, a dog barked. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the back of the chair and folded his hands in his lap, weariness stealing over him and washing away the restlessness. For a moment, he had felt some of his old spirit return, rising to the bait of matching wits with Severus, but apathy overcame him once more, tinged with despair. Things were never going to get better for him as they had for Severus; he had no hope of recovery from either of his afflictions, and he would be useless and at the mercy of whoever was kind enough to take him in until his death.

In the meantime, he had precious little to do. He still had his wand, and he could still work magic as long as it wasn't a spell requiring sight to aim, which diminished his options considerably. He couldn't learn any new spells that might prove useful unless someone helped him look them up and read them to him, which no one had time to do.

Everything Remus wanted to do was either impossible or so difficult that just thinking about making the effort made him tired, and everyone had their own lives to get on with as the Wizarding World rebuilt and recovered from the war. His closest friends were dead, and he knew Harry had taken him in out of obligation because of his ties to James, Lily, and Sirius. Other than the times when Severus delivered the potion, he had no visitors, and he spent a great deal of time alone in his room, just sitting as he was doing now. He thought he had known loneliness before during those dark days following the end of the first war, but that had been a picnic compared to his current circumstances.

"Lumos." Harry's voice was soft, but it shattered the silence of the room, making Remus start at the unexpected intrusion; he didn't know how long he'd been there, lost in thought. "Are you all right? Lizzie said you had company. Snape didn't upset you, did he?"

"No." It wasn't a lie. Severus hadn't upset him, only forced him to face the comfortable illusion he had been hiding behind. "I'm fine."

"That's good." Harry trailed off, but after a moment, he spoke again. "I got good news," he said, although the lift in his voice was hesitant, as if he wasn't certain he ought to sound as happy as he was. "I got accepted. So did Ron. We're going to have a bit of training, and then we'll start work in a few weeks."

"Congratulations." Remus turned his head in the direction of Harry's voice and smiled. "I'm sure your parents and Sirius would be very proud."

"Thanks." Harry sounded bashful then. "Anyway, I thought it'd be nice have a party to celebrate. It'd be for Ron, too, of course. I don't think I could plan it myself, though. I've never thrown a party before."

"I'll take care of it," Remus said. "Just let me know how many people you want to invite."

"I'll write up a list and give it to Ethan. He can take care of the invitations; his handwriting is nicer than Lizzie's." Harry paused, and then he added, "Hermione said she'd come by in a day or two and take you shopping."

"For what?" Remus tilted his head, curious and questioning.

"For something to wear to the party," Harry explained in a patient tone. "You haven't bought any new robes since you've been working here, but you don't have to wear those old things anymore."

"It didn't occur to me," Remus said. He'd forgotten how patched and shabby his old clothes were now that he didn't have to see them growing more threadbare by the day, but even if he'd thought about it, he didn't want to bother anyone and ask them to take him. Besides, he didn't see the point in having new clothes when he never left the house and no one other than its residents saw him.

"If you don't want to throw everything away and start over, at least get something nice for the party."

"Why? What do you want me to do? Serve punch? Walk around with a plate of hor d'oeuvres?"

"No." Harry sounded as if Remus' words had stung him. "You'll be a guest like anyone else."

"Then you'll forgive me for extending my regrets. I'm not in the mood for a party."

"Remus, I want to celebrate with my friends. With the people who are most important to me. There are enough who won't be there as it is."

Remus closed his eyes and sighed, annoyed with himself for being so caught up in his own self-centered wallowing; it would be selfish of him to disappoint Harry after everything Harry had done for him. It would only last a few hours, after all.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "Of course I'll be there."

"Thanks." Remus could hear him smiling. "This party means a lot to me."

"I'll make sure it's a special one, then."

Remus spent the next few days planning the event with Lizzie and Ethan: the ballroom would be decorated in Gryffindor colors; the food would be provided by Crepe and Flambé, the most prestigious catering company in wizarding London, who promised they could provide a four-tiered chocolate cake with two miniature Aurors - one dark-haired and one red-haired - battling a mountain troll on top; there would be live music and a small space cleared for dancing.

Hermione came by as promised and took Remus to Madam Malkin's, and he hated every minute of it. They took the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, Hermione insisting on going first so she could help him out of the fireplace if necessary. That part wasn't any trouble, but he didn't like being out in the open where he didn't know how far it was between one place and another, where there were so many people jostling against him, and where it was so loud that he could feel his head throbbing with the threat of a headache within ten minutes. Even with Hermione's hand on his elbow and his charmed cane to help, it took all his concentration to keep from tripping and falling flat on his face. It was the first time since he'd learned his way around Harry's house that he'd felt so helpless, and he didn't like it.

To make things worse, the actual shopping part took far longer than he expected. He thought they would go in the shop, she would pick something, he would pay for it, and that would be that, but Hermione had other ideas.

"Your eyes change color in different light," she remarked as she held up yet another set of robes in front of him. "I never noticed that before. Have they always?"

"Yes." Chameleon eyes, his mother had called them. Sometimes blue, sometimes green, but mostly a blend of both. He remembered they changed, but he could no longer clearly recall the exact hues.

"Your hair's gone more grey, too," she mused. "You should have something a little more colorful. Brown doesn't suit you."

"Hermione, I really don't care," he said in as patient a tone as he could manage. "Just choose something. Anything will do. It isn't as if I'll know the difference."

"But other people will see you," she said in a voice that implied she thought he was being obtuse for not realizing that.

"It doesn't matter. They won't care any more than I do."

"If you think that, you really are blind," she retorted. "Here, take this and try it on." She put something in his hands that felt heavy and soft, a far more expensive style of garment than he was accustomed to wearing. "It's a dark sapphire blue, which will bring out the blue in your eyes, and there's silver needlework along the cuffs, collar, and hem that will look nice with your hair."

When they finally found a set of robes that fit well and met with Hermione's approval, she guided him to the counter to pay for them, and that was that. He had something to wear for the party. He wished Harry had planned it for a night when he was either indisposed or could claim fatigue following the transformation, but the party was to be held three nights following the full moon, more than enough time for him to have recovered. In the meantime, Severus stopped by every day of the week prior to deliver the potion. He never stayed long, but he needled Remus the entire time he was there, and for a little while after he was gone, Remus felt more like his old self.

It was ironic and a bit sad, he thought, that obligatory visits from Severus were the only things he had to look forward to. But Lizzie and Ethan deflected his attempts to strike up a conversation with polite formality, and Harry missed meals more often than not while he enjoyed his last few days of freedom with his friends. It wasn't as if Harry was obliged to keep him company anyway; he was Harry's dependant, and while the war may have brought them together, he knew he wasn't one of Harry's friends. He'd always felt his outsider status, but now it was especially keen, the solitude and silence fueling his loneliness.

On the night of the transformation, he closed himself up in his room and asked Harry to lock him in from the outside. Harry had sheepishly told him that Lizzie was nervous about being in the house with him even though Harry had assured her the potion made him safe. Harry had offered to send her to the Leaky Cauldron for the night, but Remus had disagreed, saying that wasn't a practical solution for the long-term, and he had suggested Harry should lock him in instead.

He put up a sound-proofing charm as well before undressing and sitting on the rug in front of the hearth to wait for the transformation. He didn't know how long it would be; he didn't have a clock in his room to chime for him, which he supposed he ought to remedy. But soon he felt the first stirrings of the change beneath his skin, a prickling itch that grew more intense until it turned into spiking pain as his body contorted out of its natural shape.

After it was over, he still couldn't see, but it didn't matter as much in that form, because he could

smell. He padded all over his room for hours with his nose pressed to the floor and on the furniture, breathing in each new scent and following its trail. Some were new and fresh, and some were old and fading, but they were still detectable to his sensitive nose. After he'd been over the entire room twice, he longed to explore the rest of the house, but that was impossible, so he curled up in front of the fire and slept instead.

In the morning, he crawled into bed, shivering and aching in the aftermath of the transformation, and the world seemed emptier with the loss of his keen sense of smell. It was yet another indication of how topsy-turvy his life had become that he had any reason, however slight, to look forward to the transformation.

At noon, Lizzie brought him some broth and tea, but otherwise, he was left alone all day. He slept, and by late afternoon, he was rested enough to bathe and go downstairs for dinner. Harry was home, and he asked if Remus was all right, and if there was anything he needed to make things better the next month. Remus said that he was fine. He didn't mention the scents.

On the night of the party, Remus put off getting ready until the last minute, using overseeing the preparations as an excuse. But everything was running smoothly; no one needed his help or his reminders, and so he went upstairs to bathe and dress in his new robes, dawdling as long as he could and dreading the moment when he could delay no longer.

The party was in full swing when he arrived. He could sense the maze of bodies; there were voices nearby and far away, throwing off his sense of perspective, and he froze, not knowing how to proceed. He didn't want to bang the shins of everyone in his path with his cane, nor did he want to embarrass himself by trying to feel his way to a secluded corner and end up bumping into people or accidentally groping them in inappropriate places. Besides, he knew the room had been rearranged to suit the needs of the party, and he couldn't remember what had been moved where. He didn't know what to do, and he was on the verge of turning around and going back upstairs when he felt a hand close around his elbow.

"There's an empty chair near the hearth, Mr. Lupin," Lizzie murmured, and he smiled at her, hoping she could see his gratitude in it.

"That would be fine, thank you."

He heard the buzz of conversation diminish as they passed by, but he ignored it, holding his head up high as he let Lizzie guide him to the chair. A fire crackled merrily, warming him as he settled in the chair, resting his cane between his knees. "Lizzie, would you come and get me in about an hour, please?" he asked. He didn't want to be stuck waiting there like a lump until the party was over so he could make his way across the room safely by himself again.

"Of course."

He turned his gaze towards the fireplace and sat quietly, listening. He could identify the voices of people he knew mingled with the voices of strangers, wizards and witches whom Harry had met through the Ministry perhaps, or friends from school whom Remus hadn't met or had forgotten. He had hoped perhaps Andromeda would come and bring Teddy, but when he asked, Harry had reluctantly admitted she had refused the invitation. Remus hated being stuck there, unable to get up and walk out whenever he pleased; he hated not being able to wander through the crowd and talk to people, but he kept a pleasant expression fixed on his face and hoped no one could tell how miserable he was.

"Hullo, Remus. It's good to see you."

Instinctively, he lifted his face up toward the person who had addressed him and smiled, pleased by the unexpected distraction. "Hello, Bill. I'd say the same, but..." He shrugged and forced himself to laugh lightly.

"Well, I'm glad you're here, even if you can't see," Bill replied. "When you went down, I thought we'd lost you."

"Everyone says I was lucky."

"I agree. We've suffered enough losses." Bill's voice was soft and wistful, and Remus knew he was probably thinking of Fred.

"I'm sorry about your brother. I wanted to send my condolences to your family when I heard, but-" He broke off, not knowing how to finish without sounding self-pitying.

"I understand. We all do, and I thank you for the thought on behalf of the family." He paused, falling silent for a moment before asking, "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine." Remus smiled and shrugged again. "I can get around the house on my own. I haven't knocked anything over in weeks," he added, widening his smile so Bill would know it was all right to laugh, and Bill did chuckle.

"You seem to have a good attitude about it. That helps, I'm sure."

"Sink or swim," he said, his smile taking more effort to maintain. "I don't have any other options. But that's true of anyone who has suffered a loss. How are your parents?"

"Bearing up. Sink or swim, like you said, and they have five other children who still need them. Dad's thrown himself into helping clean up the Ministry to get through, and Mum is channeling her energy into pestering the rest of us to get married - or in my case, to start having babies. I think she hopes having a new child in the family will help fill the void, and it might at that, but Fleur and I aren't in any hurry."

"Ah." Remus didn't know what to say to that since his first thought - *at least your child won't be taken away because you're deemed unfit to raise him* - was unfair and inappropriate, and a silence fell, not quite awkward, but not quite comfortable either.

"Did you want anything?" Bill asked suddenly. "Something to drink or some cake?"

"No, thank you." Remus shook his head. "I'm fine."

"I think I'm going to graze the table, then," Bill said. "I'll talk to you soon."

Remus nodded; a moment later, he heard Bill's footsteps fading away, and he was alone again - but not for long.

"Ah-ha, so this is where the life of the party is."

"Hello, Severus." Remus turned to face him. "I'm surprised you're here."

"That I was invited or that I accepted?"

"I knew about the invitation. Harry's opinion of you has risen considerably of late. I'm surprised you decided to attend."

"I could say the same of you," Severus replied. "Did Potter give you the night off?"

"He invited me."

"Ah, Cinderella received her invitation and sneaked out of the scullery to attend the ball. Funny, I don't see anyone coming along to sweep you off your feet."

"No, it appears I'm stuck with one of the evil stepsisters instead."

"It's unfortunate that your party finery is being wasted," Severus replied, and Remus was surprised anew; he expected Severus to grow angry after that blatant jibe, but Severus was holding his temper remarkably well these days. Perhaps being free for the first time in twenty years had mellowed him, perhaps nearly dying had given him a different perspective on things, or perhaps it was because he enjoyed seeing Remus brought so low. "What happened - did your fairy godmother pay a call?"

"Hermione picked it out," Remus said, plucking at one sleeve listlessly. He felt out of place for more reasons than he could count, and he felt ridiculous wearing new robes paid for with money he hadn't earned. It was all a sham, and he wanted to leave before anyone else aside from Severus realized how foolish he looked. "Harry insisted."

"Of course he did," Severus drawled, his tone scathing and condescending. "He couldn't have you making him a laughingstock by showing up in your real clothes. They're fit for the bin."

"I didn't want to be here in the first place." Remus' voice was low and tight as he clutched his cane and stood up quickly. "Excuse me."

It didn't matter if he stumbled clumsily through the crowd now; he wanted to escape, wanted to stop pretending everything was fine even if it meant stepping on toes and whacking legs with his cane. He murmured a litany of "excuse me"s, and the crowd parted for him; he imagined them seeing him coming and stepping aside, looks of pity on their faces, or perhaps they didn't notice, and someone they were talking to tugged their arm, alerting them to get out of the way before they were run over by a blind werewolf desperate to escape.

A hand on his arm stopped him abruptly. "Professor, are you all right? You don't look well." Neville's voice was full of earnest concern.

"I've got a bit of a headache, that's all." He mustered a wan smile. "It's the noise and the heat, I think. I just need some air, and I'll be fine."

"Can I get you anything? Send for somebody?"

"There's no need. I'm going to step outside for a moment."

Neville let him go, and he made his way to the door without stumbling or falling, breathing easier once the party was behind him.

He paused at the foot of the stairs and rested one hand on the post, debating. He could take a few moments to compose himself and go back in; he didn't want even the slightest mar on Harry's evening. But the thought of going back in there was unbearable. If Harry noticed his absence and asked about it in the morning, he would say he'd developed a headache from all the noise, blame it on his more acute hearing, and leave it at that.

Lost in thought with the sounds of the party still loud and clear, he didn't hear anyone approach until someone's hand fell on his shoulder, and he jumped, startled. "Lizzie?"

There was no answer, but the hand slid down his back to rest at his waist, offering him the assistance of a supporting arm.

"I can manage the stairs on my own," he said, trying to move away, but whoever-it-was held him fast. Not Lizzie, then. She wouldn't have put her arm around him this way in the first place, and if she had, she would have removed it at the first sign of resistance. "Ethan, is that you? You'd probably best go and see if Harry needs anything. I'll be fine."

But the hand merely gave him a little squeeze and remained where it was, and Remus didn't bother pushing it away; he couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him like that, and it felt good, the reassuring contact helping him to calm his jangled nerves more quickly. He didn't know whom his mysterious helper was, but it was someone who wasn't afraid or disgusted by doing more than grasping his elbow to help him along. They ascended the stairs in silence, and he expected his helper to leave once they reached his bedroom, but to his surprise, the arm didn't fall away from his waist until they were inside.

"Thank you," he said. "I appreciate your assistance."

There was no answer, and for a moment, he thought his helper had gone until he heard the rustle of sheets and the soft tread of footsteps muffled by the rug.

"What are you doing?"

But still there was no response. His cane was plucked from his hand, and he was guided to sit down on the edge of the bed; sliding his hand along as far as he could reach, he realized that his helper had turned back the covers, and he frowned, confused. What was going on here?

His confusion doubled and became mixed with alarm when he felt this mysterious someone removing his shoes and socks, and he groped for his wand, but not quickly enough; fingers closed around his wrist, but their grip was only tight enough to hold, not to hurt, and as soon as Remus withdrew his hand from his wand, they let go.

"Answer me," he demanded. "What are you doing?"

But he was ignored, and once his shoes and socks were off, whoever-it-was moved away from him; he could hear the drawers of his dresser being opened one by one until the person found whatever they were looking for. Then they returned to the bed, and something was dropped in Remus' lap; when he ran his hand across it, he recognized the unmistakable feel of his thin flannel nightshirt.

The person grasped his arms, helping him up, and a flare of panic shot through him; he grabbed for the person's hands, trying to push them away. In the back of his mind, it disturbed him that he didn't know whether he was more afraid that this person was trying to take advantage of him, thinking him weak and defenseless, or that this person was trying to help him in ways that he wasn't prepared to deal with.

"Stop it! I'm not helpless!"

The person went still and then pulled free of his grasp; he thought that was the end of it, and the next thing he heard would be retreating footsteps and his bedroom door closing, but instead, he felt a hand resting - just resting - on his shoulder, and his chest tightened, his throat closing up.

"You don't have to do this," he whispered hoarsely, clenching his fists tightly in the folds of his nightshirt so that whoever-it-was might not notice they were shaking; he was no longer afraid, for if this stranger wanted to hurt or overpower him, he knew they could have taken his wand and done

so by now, but he was unnerved. "I can take care of myself."

The hands returned to his arms, urging him to his feet, and this time he didn't protest, letting the person lead him down the corridor to the loo, but the tightness in his chest constricted until he could barely breathe. He didn't want this kind of help - this kindness. He was afraid of it, afraid of how easily it could strip away his defenses and make him vulnerable. He didn't know how to cope with someone taking care of him, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. It wasn't something that happened to him, not since his parents' deaths; it was pushing him to the edge of panic now, yet he didn't protest, a small, lonely part of him needing more.

He changed into his nightshirt and performed his evening ablutions while the person waited outside the door; he hoped his silent helper would go away before his mind began taunting him with the knowledge that this kind of care was a luxury he wouldn't experience after this night, but he felt a hand on his elbow as soon as he emerged.

They returned to his bedroom, and the hands took his dress robes, guided him into bed and pulled the covers snugly around him, tucking him in. They smoothed his hair away from his face, and then they were gone. He heard footsteps moving away from him, towards the wardrobe; the wardrobe door creaked as it was opened, and Remus listened to the rustle of fabric as the person hung up his robes and then closed the wardrobe and headed to the door.

"Thank you," he said, hoping for a response, but the only answer he received was the sound of his bedroom door closing.

Puzzled and intrigued, he turned over the encounter in his mind, trying to figure out who it could have been. He was reasonably certain his helper was male, or a woman with hands at least as large as his own. Beyond that, he'd been too distracted to pay attention to details. Harry, perhaps? But then why hadn't he said anything? The silence was confusing. Why didn't whoever it was want him to know about it?

Perhaps they thought he would accept help from an anonymous stranger more easily than from a friend. Perhaps it was Harry after all, not wanting Remus to feel guilty for taking him away from the party. The more he thought about it, the more he decided that was the most likely answer, and he resolved to say a proper thank you in the morning. Satisfied at having solved the mystery, he settled in and closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep far more quickly than usual.

The next morning over breakfast, Remus affected a casual tone as he spooned scrambled eggs onto his plate. "Thank you for your help last night, Harry. I'm sorry to have taken you away from the party, though. I would have been fine on my own, you know."

There was a moment of silence, and when he spoke, Harry's voice was filled with bewilderment. "What are you talking about?"

Remus smiled. "Come now, Harry, there's no need to continue the ruse. I know you didn't want to say anything last night, but I figured out it must have been you."

"Must have been me for what?"

Setting down the bowl of eggs carefully, Remus turned to face him. "You're serious. You've no idea what I'm talking about."

"None at all, I'm afraid." He heard the clinking of Harry's silverware as he picked up his fork. "I noticed you were gone and asked if anyone had seen you. Neville said you had a headache and were going out for air." He paused before adding, "You never came back, though."

"I did have a headache. The noise was too much for me, I'm afraid," Remus said slowly, puzzled anew now that he knew his deduction had been wrong. "I was going upstairs, and someone came along and helped me. I thought it was you."

"You don't know who it was?" Harry was curious now, sounding as intrigued as Remus felt.

"No, they didn't say anything."

"Are you all right? They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No, I'm fine. I was a little rattled at first, but I assumed it was a party guest, which means it was likely someone I know. I can't imagine a stranger doing that."

"There were a few people there you don't know. Everyone else was connected to Hogwarts or the Order."

Remus nodded. "That's what I thought. But still, it's odd they didn't want to identify themselves."

"They didn't... you know... try anything?" A hint of worry had crept into Harry's voice, and Remus hastened to assure him.

"No, they didn't try anything, and they didn't force me into anything. I could have put up a fight and stopped them, if I'd wanted to." *But I didn't*, he added silently. As unexpected and unsettling as the experience had been, he hadn't felt in danger, not after the stranger had simply prevented him from using his wand rather than taking it away from him and then touched his shoulder as if to assure him that he was safe. "I think they - he - wanted to help, for some reason."

And I wanted to let him. The thought popped in his mind before he could squelch it, but he pushed it aside; he couldn't afford to think about letting someone take care of him. He'd never fully relied on anyone else; the conditions of his life had forced him into independence, especially emotional independence. As much as he wanted to be a normal person, he wasn't; that meant some roads were permanently closed to him, and he had learned at a young age which ones they were.

"You're sure it was a he?" Harry asked, no longer sounding worried but curious.

"Well, either it was a man or a rather masculine woman if their hands were anything to go by," Remus conceded wryly. "It couldn't have been Hermione or Ginny, because they don't have mannish hands, and it wasn't you. Beyond that, my suspect list is wide open."

"Huh. That's weird."

"Very."

They ate in silence for a while, and then Harry spoke again, his tone casual. "Oh, by the way, Neville's coming over tomorrow afternoon. I asked him to fix up the conservatory, and I thought maybe you could give him a hand."

"Certainly."

"Thanks." Harry fell silent, and Remus heard him pushing his food around on his plate. "I also thought you could be in charge of it once it's finished. Neville said all you'd have to do is water the plants. You can let Ethan know if they seem to be dying or need pruning."

Busy work, Remus thought, but at least it would give him something to do, and it would be nice to

have the conservatory habitable again. Right now, the room reeked with the fetid stench of rotted plants, mold, and dead earth. There was nothing dangerous in it, thanks to the thorough cleansing the house had received, but it was unpleasant, to say the least.

"Of course. I'd be happy to," he said.

"Brilliant." There was relief in Harry's voice, which Remus didn't understand. Did he think Remus would refuse to do something he asked? How could he, when he knew he wasn't doing nearly enough to justify the salary Harry gave him? But he said nothing, and Harry began talking about the up-coming match between Puddlemere and the Cannons, which was causing him to squabble with Ron every time they got together. Remus listened and smiled in the right places, but his mind was elsewhere.

The unsolved mystery from the night before gave Remus something to think about for the rest of the day, but he had to concede that he didn't have enough information to hazard another guess. He disliked not knowing, but he resigned himself to letting it go and forgetting about it. Unless his helper came forward and confessed, he would never know, and it wouldn't happen again.

The following afternoon passed quickly while he helped Neville clean up the conservatory. Neville cleared out the old, dead plants and let Remus cast the cleaning charms while he levitated the garbage out, since scourfiging a large area didn't require precise aim. He missed a few spots which Neville took care of when he returned, and then Neville checked the old pots for damage. Most were in good condition now that they were clean, and the few that weren't were easily repaired.

"I brought a lot of green plants," Neville said, once everything was ready. "But I have some flowers, too. I chose things that would create a nice scent together, since they're going to be in a confined area. I didn't want them to overpower anyone who comes in here."

Remus remembered a little from his Herbology classes, but it had been a long time since he'd worked with plants. He'd forgotten how good it felt to plunge his fingers into rich, moist dirt, and he enjoyed the work; it took him longer to re-pot a plant than it did Neville, but he wanted to be careful and not damage anything, which meant a lot of groping of the pot and the soil to make sure he had everything in the right place.

He was filthy by the time they were finished, having managed to smudge dirt on his face in addition to getting it all over his robes and hands and under his fingernails. He was tired, but satisfied with the afternoon's work. Neville had been patient with him and good company too, a bit shy at first, but gradually relaxing and chatting with him. When they were finished, he guided Remus over to a wrought iron rack near the door and helped Remus explore the rack with his hands to figure out where the watering can was and which shelf the plant food was on.

"It's a self-filling can," Neville explained. "All you have to do is tap it with your wand, and it'll fill up with water. Then add a pinch of the food and water all the plants every two days or so, although you can cut back if the soil still feels moist, because you don't want to over-water them. If it gets really hot, check the leaves to make sure they're not drying up, but they should be all right in here."

It was an easy task, one that Remus was content to take care of, and he began spending more time in the conservatory. Harry preferred the parlor, but Remus found the quiet breathing life of the plants relaxing, and Neville had indeed chosen blooming flowers that were pleasantly scented without being overwhelming. He could feel the light and life in the room even if he couldn't see it, and he found it more enjoyable to sit there rather than in his room. It wasn't long before Harry, Lizzie, and Ethan learned to look for him there before checking anywhere else.

It was there where his mysterious helper found him again as well, some two weeks after Harry's party. He had finished watering the plants and put the watering can and plant food on the shelf where they belonged before taking a seat on one of the wrought iron benches. It was near the roses, and he could smell their delicate scent more than anything else when he sat there. He was lost in thought, but not so deeply that he didn't hear the footsteps - someone taking long strides and who wasn't attempting to hide their approach. Remus glanced in the direction of the sound. Harry wasn't due home for hours yet, and Lizzie had a far softer gait. "Ethan?"

The footsteps stopped near his bench, followed by a rustle of fabric and a stirring of air near him, and he felt the tingle of another living presence overlapping his own, letting him know that someone had sat down beside him.

"It's you, I suppose," Remus said, turning his sightless gaze to the floor again.

He sat on one end of the bench with his knees together and his hands folded in his lap, his shoulders rounded, his head bent; it was a posture of weariness and defeat, but for some reason, he didn't bother to straighten up and give the illusion of composure as he usually did when he was in the presence of others. He supposed he ought to have felt curious or perhaps worried that his silent helper had returned, but he couldn't muster the energy to care.

He'd been feeling increasingly listless over the past week or so; forcing himself to do his usual tasks around the house left him drained, his appetite had decreased, and he was sleeping more. He went to bed early and slept for ten to twelve hours each night, yet still he took long naps in the afternoon. The day before, Harry mentioned bringing in a Healer to examine him if his energy didn't return soon, but Remus doubted a Healer would do him any good; his lethargy didn't stem from a physical ailment, but from a growing sense of apathy which no Healer could cure.

"I wasn't expecting you again," he added.

He waited for a moment, but only silence greeted his remark, and he began to wonder if perhaps his imagination was playing tricks on him. "I don't know why you came if you aren't going to say anything. I feel silly talking to myself." He sighed and shook his head. "Perhaps I am talking to myself. No one is real to me anymore. They're just voices. If they don't speak, I don't know they're there. If they don't touch me, I don't know they're there. But no one touches me unless they have to. I'm alone in the dark."

He fell silent, more than half convinced that he'd imagined someone being there - and then he felt warm fingers wrapping around his left hand, pulling it away from his lap and encircling it in a tight, reassuring grip. Remus felt his mouth fall open, but he closed it again quickly and reached out with his free hand, feeling his way along the stranger's arm from wrist to elbow.

"So you are there after all." He got a little answering squeeze of his fingers in response. "But you won't talk to me. I assume you don't want me to know who you are, although I can't imagine why not."

More silence, and Remus frowned, annoyance flaring - the first break in his lassitude that he'd felt in days. "This is ridiculous. I don't know what sort of game you're playing, but I want no part of it. I won't be made a fool of."

He yanked his hand free, grasped his cane and rose to his feet, but the stranger stood and moved in front of him, resting both hands on his shoulders to halt his progress, and Remus knocked the stranger's arms away, glaring. "I told you I'm not playing your games! I-"

A finger pressed against his lips, halting the flow of words, but as soon as he stopped talking, the finger was removed, and both hands rested on his shoulders again.

"Why are you doing this?" Remus' voice was a ragged whisper, and he clasped his hands tightly, as if holding himself together through sheer force of will. "You must stop. I can't let you do this."

The hands fell away, and Remus breathed a sigh of relief, hoping the stranger would back off and give him a chance to compose himself. He reached out with his cane to find the way around the person blocking his path. He *had* to get away; he couldn't give in to the false hope this stranger was offering; it was an illusion, and if he revealed his vulnerability even a little bit, he knew he would regret it once the illusion ended and the stranger disappeared, never to return.

But the hands grasped his shoulders again and guided him with a firm touch to sit on the bench, and he reluctantly complied. Perhaps if he went along with whatever the stranger wanted, then the stranger would leave sooner. Once he was seated, the stranger released him, and a moment later, he felt the warmth of the stranger's presence beside him again as a pair of long-fingered hands caught his left hand, holding it between them, but that was all. He sat quiet and still, and the stranger simply held his hand.

"If it's scintillating conversation you're after, you've come to the wrong place. I don't have much to talk about," Remus said at last, hoping the stranger would take the hint and leave.

The stranger rapped the back of Remus' hand sharply with a flick of his fingers, and Remus turned his head, arching a questioning eyebrow. "You disagree?"

Another flick, but not as hard this time.

"I see. What is it that I'm meant to talk about, then? Shall I tell you the riveting tale of how I watered plants today? Or perhaps you'd like to hear of my morning adventure, when I dropped a new bar of soap I was taking to the bath with me."

He didn't intend to sound as sharp and bitter as he knew he did, but there was something different about talking to someone anonymous. He knew that his visitor was likely someone he knew, perhaps knew rather well, but he didn't know for certain; it was liberating in a way, and his usual diplomatic caution was slipping.

"I don't have anything to talk about," he continued, his voice sounding hard even to his own ears, "because I don't have anything to do, and if you expect me to blather on about my feelings, you can forget it. I'm fine, and that's all anyone needs to know."

A slap landed on the back of his hand, just hard enough to hurt. "What was that for?" he demanded. "I don't owe you anything. You won't speak to me, and you won't tell me who you are. I don't have to talk to you."

With a little huff, he faced forward, letting the stranger keep possession of his hand but otherwise ignoring the other person's presence entirely.

"I know you, don't I?" he asked at last, unable to resist poking at the mystery of his visitor's identity despite his resolve not to speak. "I must, or I doubt you'd be doing this, but I can't think of

anyone who would. Do I know you?" He paused, realizing the futility of trying to communicate with someone who wouldn't speak unless they had a code. "Squeeze my hand once for yes and twice for no," he added, and he immediately felt a single squeeze. *Yes*. "Do I know you well?"

There was a moment's hesitation, as if whoever-it-was was debating on whether to answer, and then Remus felt another gentle yes-squeeze.

"That narrows it down a bit, then," he said, already turning over the possibilities in his mind. "The question now is, where do I know you from? Hogwarts or the Order?" Remus mused. "There aren't that many people whom I would say I know well, but then again, 'well' is a relative term. You could also be deceiving me about how well we know each other to throw me off-track."

There was no response to that, although Remus didn't really expect one since he hadn't asked yes or no questions, and if the stranger didn't want to give away his identity, it was unlikely he would reveal more clues even if Remus pressed for more information. He mulled over the situation in silence while the stranger sat beside him and held his hand; after a while, the stranger released his hand, and he could hear the rustle of fabric that signaled movement, and he knew the stranger was standing to leave.

"Are you planning to come back?" he blurted out, scarcely aware of his intention to ask before the question was out of his mouth, and he shook his head, wishing he could call it back.

But the stranger captured his hand again and gave it a little squeeze. *Yes*.

As the stranger's footsteps receded, Remus remained where he was, stunned into immobility. He had too many questions, precious few answers, and the hope of another visit - another chance to unravel this mystery. All in all, it was one of the most bizarre afternoons Remus had spent in a long time, but he was already looking forward to the stranger's return.

Chapter Two

Days passed, and life fell back into its normal routine. For three days, Remus spent his afternoons in the conservatory, alert and listening for any slight noise that might be approaching footsteps, but when they came, they belonged to Lizzie, who popped in occasionally to ask if he wanted some tea. Only once did the footsteps belong to someone other than Lizzie.

"There you are." Kingsley's deep voice was a welcome sound to Remus, who sat up straight, smiling as he turned to greet Kingsley. "The housekeeper said I'd probably find you in here."

"Yes, it's quite peaceful here since Neville fixed it up for Harry. Have a seat," he said, scooting over to give Kingsley room on the bench. "Lizzie could bring some tea, if you like."

"I can't stay," Kingsley replied. "I only stopped in to see if Harry was home. The housekeeper said she hadn't seen him this afternoon, but that you might know where he is."

"Oh." Remus' smile flagged, but he fought to keep it in place. "No, I'm afraid I don't know where he is. You might check with Ron, Hermione, or Ginny, though. He may be with one of them."

"Thanks, I'll do that. When he comes home, tell him I'm looking for him, will you?"

"He's not in danger, is he?" Remus asked, alarmed. The war was over, but there were still supporters of Voldemort who hadn't been caught, and he wouldn't have been at all surprised to learn some of them were seeking revenge against Harry.

"No, I wanted to walk him through some paperwork and brief him on what to expect when he begins work, that's all," Kingsley said, his tone reassuring, and Remus gave a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad that's all it is." He paused, and then he asked hopefully, "You're sure you don't want some tea? It's been a while since we've spoken, and-"

"I'm sorry, Remus, but I really can't stay. I've got to get back to the Ministry," Kingsley interrupted. "You'll give Harry the message for me?"

"Yes." Remus nodded, feeling his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment. "Yes, of course I will."

"Thanks. I'll see myself out."

"Good-bye." Remus clasped his hands together tightly, not quite wringing them, after he heard Kingsley's departing footsteps fade away.

He hadn't meant to sound quite so desperate for company, and he chastised himself for being foolish; he'd heard through Harry about Kingsley being elected Minister of Magic, so of course Kingsley didn't have time to sit and chat. Remus bowed his head to hide his flushed face and vowed not to do anything so foolish again.

It was not the first time he'd been rebuffed; he had asked Lizzie help him make a fire call to Andromeda on several different occasions; the first time, he'd received no response, and he chalked it up to calling when she was away. The next time, Andromeda had been curt with him when he'd asked if she would bring Teddy for a visit as promised. He had offered to go to her if it would be more convenient; he would risk imposing by asking someone to help him get there if it meant being able to visit Teddy. She had put him off and refused to commit to a visit, and the next two times he'd tried to contact her, she hadn't answered, which he suspected wasn't the result of bad

timing. She was shutting him out of Teddy's life, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Over the next few days, he felt himself begin to sink back into apathy again, and he didn't bother trying to pull himself up. He mustered the energy to do what he needed to do, and the rest of the time, he sequestered himself in his room, curled up in a tight ball in his bed, and slept. Even the prospect of matching wits with Severus didn't rouse him from his torpid state.

"You look like hell, Lupin." Severus' tone was scathing as Remus shuffled into the kitchen and made his way to the table, dropping heavily into the nearest chair.

The effort of coming downstairs had drained him, and it took all his strength not to slump as he slid his hand along the top of the table, searching for the goblet. He could smell the potion, its acrid stench too potent to miss, and he let that guide him. Closing his fingers around the base of the goblet, he lifted it to his lips, drank quickly, and pushed it back towards Severus.

"Thank you for bringing it," he said, an automatic response that earned a snort from Severus.

"That's it? No witty retort? No clever come-back?"

"Apparently not." Remus sighed wearily as he rose to his feet again and moved away from the table. He wasn't up to sparring; he was tired, and all he wanted to do was return to his room.

"I've always known you were a bloody coward, Lupin, and now you're finally proving me right." The sneer in Severus' voice was unmistakable. "Look at you. You're pathetic. What are you trying to do? You don't have the nerve to kill yourself outright, so you're letting yourself waste away instead?"

Remus clutched his cane tightly in both hands and didn't say anything. He could have issued a retort, but he knew Severus would twist his words around and mock him, and he had no desire to give Severus more ammunition than he already had. Severus didn't care whether Remus lived or died; he only wanted the opportunity to gloat, and any attempt on Remus' part to argue or defend himself would be futile. Instead, he turned away and walked out the door, wanting nothing more than to return to bed and escape in the oblivion and peace that sleep offered.

For the next two days, he said nothing but "hello" and "thank you" when Severus delivered the Wolfsbane potion, no matter how much Severus tried to goad him; his mind felt dull, his body felt too heavy to drag around, and it wasn't worth the effort to rise to Severus' bait anymore. Finally, Severus took the hint, and on the fourth day, he stopped trying to needle Remus and handed over the potion without a word.

That night, Harry was home for dinner for the first time in over a week, but Remus didn't join him, having got out of the habit of eating dinner. He had lunch and then a light tea, and that was all; when Harry brought a tray to his room, the scent of the pork roast and vegetables was more nauseating than appetizing, and he knew his stomach would rebel if he tried to force down the rich, heavy food.

"I brought you some dinner. Snape said you look like you haven't been eating well," Harry said without preamble, and Remus heard him place the tray on the bedside table before the mattress dipped with his weight when he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Severus was exaggerating," he replied, his voice sounding hoarser than usual even to his own ears. "You know he has a tendency to be dramatic."

"I can't argue with that," Harry replied. "Especially since his exact words were that he didn't give a

damn if you died, but he didn't want anyone accusing him of poisoning the Wolfsbane." Remus snorted at that, but Harry continued, "But I'd say he was understating the case. You're not thin anymore, Remus. You're gaunt, and you look frail. Your cheeks are hollow, and I bet I could count your ribs."

Remus didn't have an answer for that. He knew he had lost weight; he could feel the difference in his body when he bathed, but he didn't know how much weight he had lost or how it had affected his appearance. Suddenly, he felt Harry's hand resting on top of his own, and he jumped, startled by the unexpected contact.

"I'm sorry I haven't been home much lately," Harry said, his voice quiet and laced with regret as he curled his fingers around Remus' hand and squeezed it carefully, as if afraid of hurting him if he pressed too hard. "I've been busy getting ready for work, and..." He hesitated for a moment. "And I've been spending a lot of time with Ron and Hermione and Ginny. Especially Ginny. We've been talking a lot about the future. We want to get married, you see. Not right away, but sooner rather than later."

Mustering a smile, Remus injected some cheer into his voice. "I'm happy for you," he said. And he was. Harry deserved a happy, normal life after all he had been through, but at the same time, it reinforced the truth that Remus knew and Harry, for whatever reason, refused to admit: Remus was intruding where he had no place and didn't belong.

"Thanks." Harry squeezed his hand again. "But I'm worried about you. If you need me to be here-"

"No." Remus' voice was strong and firm. "You're young and in love. You need to be free to enjoy both states to their fullest. I'll be fine. I'm just tired, that's all. Don't worry."

"Will you promise you'll start eating more so you'll get your strength back?"

"I'll try."

"That'll have to do, I suppose." There was a teasing note in Harry's voice, but he clung to Remus' hand, lifting it into his lap and stroking the back of it gently, much to Remus' surprise; Harry had never touched him like that before, and for a moment, he wondered if perhaps Harry had been lying about not being the stranger after all. But while Harry's fingers were strong and slender like the stranger's, they weren't as long, and his hands were smaller.

"I'll leave the tray here. Is there anything else I can get for you?" Harry asked, replacing Remus' hand on the bed covers. "Anything you need?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

"Okay. Well... just ring if you change your mind."

The mattress shifted again as Harry stood, and Remus waited until he heard the quiet click of the door closing before he rolled onto his side and curled in on himself again, but his eyes remained dry, his heart too bitter to weep.

The next morning, he went through his usual routine like an automaton and then went downstairs to check in with Lizzie and Ethan. Harry was in the kitchen when he arrived, and he pushed a piece of toast and jam into Remus' hand, insisting that he eat it. He took a couple of bites while Harry watched and then discarded the rest once Harry was gone. As he had expected, Lizzie and Ethan were managing quite well on their own, and so he left the kitchen and headed to the conservatory, where the plants awaited him.

They were the only things in the house that actually needed him, although he knew someone else could take care of them easily enough once he was gone. They didn't need *him*, after all, only someone to wield the watering can, and anyone could do that. Still, it gave him a small bit of satisfaction to think there was one place where he was still useful.

He started with the climbing vines arching over the door and made his way in a slow circle around the room; he had his routine down now, knowing exactly when he would need to refill the can and where each plant was. He almost didn't have to grope for the pots now, although he did touch each plant - both leaves and soil - before he watered it to make certain it wasn't too wet or too dry. They seemed to be thriving, and that pleased him.

When he was finished, he put the watering can back in its place and then stood for a moment, debating. He was tired already, but it had been a while since he had sat in the conservatory and enjoyed the warmth and the scent of the roses. Perhaps he would sit for a few minutes and collect himself before he went back upstairs, he thought as he made his way over to his usual bench, collapsing in it with a little "whuff" of fatigue.

Tilting his face up, he could feel the heat of the sun filtering through the glass ceiling, and he closed his eyes, slouching against the back of the bench with his hands dangling between his knees. Drifting into a half-doze, he wasn't aware of the approaching footsteps until they were close by, and he was startled by the touch of a hand on his; he jumped, his heart pounding against the walls of his chest, and he instinctively jerked his head around as if he could still see the person who had approached him.

"Dear Merlin, Harry, warn a body next time, will you?" But silence greeted that remark, and Remus tilted his head quizzically. "Oh, it's you, is it? I was beginning to think I had imagined the whole thing." Warm fingers encircled his hand, but he yanked it free. "You needn't bother coming here anymore."

He rose to his feet, but the sweeping exit he had planned was ruined by a rush of wooziness, and he staggered, pressing his hand to his forehead as he struggled to regain his equilibrium. *Perhaps I should have eaten that toast after all*, he thought muzzily. The stranger grasped his shoulders and helped him sit down before taking his hand again with a much firmer grip this time, as if making it clear that Remus wasn't going anywhere just yet. Exhausted and still a little dizzy, Remus slumped on the bench.

"I'm fine," he said wearily. "I skipped breakfast, and it's catching up with me, that's all. You can leave now." But the hand holding his clung more tightly in response, and he sighed, half with exasperation and half with resignation. "Look, I don't care who you are. I don't want you here. I want to be left alone. Is that so difficult to understand?"

He tried tugging his hand free, but the stranger wouldn't release it, and his anger began to rise as well, overcoming the apathy. "Leave me alone," he demanded, yanking harder, but the stranger's grip was strong. "Go away! I can't do anything for you. I have nothing left." A wave of despair swept over him at the truth in those words. "I have nothing," he repeated, his voice ragged. "Just go away."

But the only response he got was a tightening grip on his hand, and he grimaced, holding himself away from the stranger. He didn't want to be comforted; he wanted to be left alone. He wanted to die, and admitting that didn't frighten him, although he knew it should. He had reached the point of no longer caring about life, and he didn't want to be brought back from that edge, not when he knew there was no chance of anything changing for him.

"I don't want to stay," he murmured, covering his face with his free hand. "I don't belong here."

Harry has a life. He's fallen in love. He wants to get married. He doesn't need me. No one needs me. I have nothing to do except water these damned plants. I can't raise my own son. I can't read. I can't perform any spell that requires aiming. I can't do anything anymore. I'm useless and a burden, and this job is nothing but thinly disguised charity." The words spilled out of him, flowing on a river of anger and pain.

"No one talks to me, no one visits, no one cares. I'm broken and forgotten, and everyone is going on with their lives while I sit in the dark with nothing to do as the hours go by, each one an eternity. I have nothing to look forward to, not even visiting my son. I've asked Andromeda about it. I offered to go to her. She's taken him away, so I'm not even a father anymore. My life is nothing but emptiness and darkness and loneliness, and I don't want to stay!"

He closed his mouth with an abrupt snap, disgusted with himself for revealing so much to someone whose identity he didn't know, but the words were out now, and he couldn't call them back. Drawing in a deep breath, he sat up straight and wrested his composure back into place.

"You indicated that I know you," he said at last. "So you know I've dealt with a number of obstacles, and I've found ways of living with all of them - except this one. My usual refuge has been in books, and that escape is lost to me now. Most of my independence has been taken away from me, and there will be no end to this. A few days ago, Severus called me a coward, and he was right. I *am* a coward. I'm too weak to make the best of it and keep plodding along this time. I can bear being poor, I can bear being a werewolf, but the thought of living another eighty years or more like this is simply too much. I can't do it. I don't *want* to do it."

Once more, he tugged his hand to free it, and this time, the stranger let it go. Remus stood up, and to his relief, the stranger didn't try to stop him as he moved towards the door. Carrying himself with as much dignity as he could muster, he left the conservatory without another word and returned to his room.

The full moon came and went, and Remus spent that night curled up on the hearth rug, dozing on and off as he waited for the morning to come. He wasn't interested in sniffing the room, since he couldn't imagine there being anything new to investigate, and sniffing for the sake of having something to do seemed like too much effort.

Lizzie woke him up the following afternoon, bearing some broth and toast, but he sent her away, saying he wasn't hungry before burrowing beneath the covers again. She departed and took the light meal with her, but a few minutes later, Harry brought it straight back, and he yanked Remus' pillow from beneath his head and refused to leave until Remus had eaten at least half of the toast and all of the broth.

"I'll be back with something more substantial at dinner," Harry warned, and Remus nodded an acknowledgment, but he felt certain Harry would be distracted by something or someone as he always was, thus he wouldn't have to worry about being spoon-fed that evening.

To his surprise, however, Harry did return, and Remus found himself eating a second meal for the first time in days. He didn't dare refuse, not with Harry hovering over him to make sure he swallowed every bite and slapping his hand when he tried to hide the carrots under his napkin. He didn't need sight to know Harry was watching him with the intensity of a hawk; he could practically feel the weight of Harry's gaze, and while outwardly he complied with Harry's request to eat just one more bite of grilled chicken breast, inwardly he wondered what the reason behind all this attention was.

When he awoke the next morning, he had more energy than he had felt in quite some time, which he knew was because he had eaten well the day before; he wasn't worn out by the time he made it

from his bedroom to the kitchen, which was a pleasant change. Harry wasn't at breakfast, which was something of a relief, as it meant he could get away with avoiding the sausages, just the smell of which made him nauseated. He nibbled some toast and eggs, and then he went to the conservatory; he hadn't watered the plants since before the full moon, and they were probably dry.

He had made his way around half of the room when Harry burst in, rapid footsteps ringing out on the floor as he jogged over to Remus. "A note just arrived for you," he said, sounding a little out of breath as if he had hurried the entire way to the conservatory.

"A note?" Remus' brows drew together in a puzzled V. "Who would send *me* a note?"

"There's no return address. Shall I read it?"

Remus bit his tongue to keep back his first, acerbic response, and instead, he simply said, "Yes, please do."

He heard paper ripping and then silence for a moment, and he tamped down his impatience, setting his watering can aside as he waited for Harry to read the note aloud.

"This is brilliant!" Harry exclaimed unexpectedly, and Remus jumped a little, startled by his vehemence. "Remus, someone sent you a spell that will let you read again!"

His jaw unhinged, and even when he tried to work it again to speak, no words came out; the thought that he might be able to read again was too overwhelming for him to even begin processing it.

"Well, you won't really be reading yourself," Harry continued, his voice still lifted with excitement. "The spell causes the book to be read to you, but it looks like you'll be able to start it, stop it, and pick up where you left off. Want me to get a book so we can try it?"

It took a minute for Remus to realize that Harry was awaiting an answer; his mind was too busy reeling from shock to register the question. "Yes," he said, sounding dazed even to his own ears.

"Would you like something in particular?"

"No." Remus shook his head, still dumbfounded. Read. He would be able to read again. "Anything will do."

It seemed like an eternity before Harry returned, and Remus clasped his hands together and forced himself to stand still even though he was agitated enough to burst on the inside. How was this possible? Who had sent the spell, and where did they find it? Too many questions crowded his mind, but above all else, he focused on the hope that was resurrecting inside him.

Finally, he could hear Harry's footsteps as Harry hurried to join him again. "Here's one," Harry said, and there was a scraping noise followed by a soft thump as he pushed a pot of campanulas aside and dropped the book onto the nearby table. "The note says all you have to do is tap the page where you want to start reading and speak the incantation. A voice will read the text to you - male or female, depending on the writer. Tap it and say 'back one' or two or however many pages if you want to go back, and say 'forward' however many pages if you want to skip ahead. Tap it twice to stop."

Drawing his wand, Remus stretched out his free hand and groped along the table for the book. Part of him could scarcely believe that this was real; he half-expected to wake up and find it had all been a dream. But the rest of him was eager to try the spell and see how it worked. "What is the incantation?"

Harry told him, and a tap and murmur later, he heard a male voice that was neither his own nor Harry's: "Chapter Three: The Game From Queerditch Marsh. We owe our knowledge of the rude beginnings of Quidditch to the writings of the witch Gertie Keddle, who lived on the edge of Queerditch Marsh in the eleventh century. Fortunately for us, she kept a diary, now at the Museum of-"

Remus tapped the page twice, the voice stopped, and he stood transfixed, gripping his wand tightly to quell the sudden tremor in his hands. Books were no longer lost to him. He could read. His beloved favorites, all the old books he hadn't yet read, all the new books to come - he could read them.

"Who sent the note?" he asked hoarsely. He needed to know whom to thank, although mere thanks seemed like a paltry offering to whoever had opened up his world and given him back the one thing that would make everything else more bearable.

"It's unsigned," Harry said.

"It was him," Remus murmured, reaching out to stroke the pages of the open book again. "It must have been."

"Who?"

"The man who helped me the night of the party. He's been back twice since then, but he won't speak, and I don't know who it is."

There was a moment of silence, and then he felt the weight of Harry's hand on his shoulder. "Do you want me to have Ethan and Lizzie keep watch and make sure he doesn't come back?"

"No, it's all right." Remus smiled wryly. "He probably won't be back anyway. I was rather harsh the last time."

There was another pause, and when Harry spoke again, his voice was laced with curiosity. "You're so sure it's a man, then? You weren't before."

Remus blinked, surprised to realize that he had begun thinking of the stranger as a man without really having proof. The stranger's hands seemed masculine, but that was his only clue. "I'm not absolutely certain, but it seems likely," he said at last. Picking up the book, he closed it and held it against his chest. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'd very much like to go to the library."

Laughing, Harry let his hand fall from Remus' shoulder and gave him a little nudge. "Go ahead. I'll finish watering the plants for you."

Chagrined at having forgotten, he shook his head and moved to put the book down again. "No, it's my job-"

"Take the day off," Harry said firmly.

Remus didn't need to be told twice. He felt a twinge of guilt over shirking the one useful task he could perform around the house, but he hadn't held a book in his hands in far too long, and he was giddy with anticipation. Once he reached the library, he froze, unable to decide which shelf to choose from first. Did he want to re-read an old favorite or try something new? Fiction or non-fiction? He was overwhelmed, unable to decide, and finally, he picked a book at random, pulling one from the nearest shelf and hurrying to the nearest chair.

Tucking one leg beneath him and cradling the book in his lap, he opened it, tapped the first page,

and spoke the incantation, and then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and listened, a beatific smile curving his mouth. It was different and a little odd at first, being read to rather than being able to read, but he would adjust; he would make any adjustments necessary to have books in his life again.

He sat and listened and listened, unable to get enough; the soothing voice provided a river of words, and he floated along in utter bliss, stopping occasionally to hug the book and stroke its binding as if to convince himself that this was real. Later, he sought and found a book that he had loved since his youth; his lips moved, forming the words along with the voice, his chest constricting with relief and gratitude. He hoped the stranger returned; he wanted a chance to offer his thanks, even though he doubted he could adequately express how much this gesture meant to him. Perhaps it had been a simple matter to find the spell, but it had quite literally changed Remus' life.

At lunchtime, Lizzie brought him a tray, and he reached for the sandwich absently, finishing it off without emerging from his haze of literary pleasure; hours later, Harry interrupted to summon him for dinner, and Remus reluctantly closed his book and put it aside. He wolfed down his meal without any prompting from Harry and excused himself to return to the library, and it was near midnight when he stopped reading and went to bed.

The rhythm of Remus' days changed after that; no longer did he have to drag himself out of bed or force himself to eat. His appetite returned, and he ate heartily at every meal. It no longer mattered that Harry was rarely there to dine with him; it no longer mattered that he never had visitors. At breakfast, he bolted his food, hurried to the conservatory to check the plants, watered and fed them as needed, and as soon as his task was done, he rushed to the library to spend the rest of the day reading, and there he remained, leaving only for meals, until it was time to go to bed.

In the comforting bubble woven around him by the soothing voice reading page after page, Remus could escape and forget his life. It wasn't lost on him that in the past, his escape had been a temporary respite, and he'd eventually emerged to face reality head-on again, but this time, he was trying to ignore reality as much as possible. In the past, there had been the chance reality would change for the better, and he'd been optimistic that it would. Now, there was no hope for change, and his optimism had been replaced by resignation. At least now, his conditions were tolerable enough that he no longer wanted to die, and that was, he knew, as good as it was going to get.

Days passed, and his mysterious benefactor didn't return, which was disappointing, but not a surprise. Remus doubted the man would ever come back after the things Remus had said to him the last time, but at least those visits weren't the only thing he had to look forward to anymore. He had something more reliable, and books would never abandon or disappoint him.

Thus he was surprised when someone entered the library, footsteps muffled by the heavy carpets covering the hardwood floor. Engrossed in a text on cargo cult magic, Remus didn't notice anyone had joined him until he heard someone clear their throat, and he jumped, startled. With a sheepish smile, he fumbled for his wand and tapped the book to stop the voice; it cut off mid-word, and he closed the book and put it and his wand aside.

"Is it you?" he asked hopefully, stretching out his hand in anticipation of feeling warm, slender fingers enclose his own.

Instead, he felt the chill of a metal goblet thrust into his hand, and a rush of heat flooded his face when he realized his visitor was not his silent friend. "Ah. Severus. It's that time of the month already?"

"You were expecting someone else?"

Remus shrank down in his chair, awash in disappointment as he realized he *had* probably driven away his silent friend for good. "No," he said softly. "Not really." He downed the potion and held out the goblet, hoping Severus wouldn't linger, but luck wasn't with him.

"So this is what you're up to these days." The sneer was evident in Severus' voice as he took the goblet. "Instead of staring at the walls, you're hiding in the library. Don't you ever leave the house?"

"How?" The response came out more sharply than Remus intended, but he thought it was a foolish question for a man as intelligent as Severus to ask. "I don't know my way around anywhere but this house, and venturing out alone is asking to get lost or to take a nasty spill or-" He drew in a deep breath. "Or be an object of pity because I can't find my own way."

"Haven't you asked anyone to help you?" Severus asked in a tone that implied Remus was particularly dense for not having thought of it himself.

"Like who?" Remus countered. "No one even visits me. Why should I think they would be willing to help? Harry isn't here most of the time, and he's got his job to think about. Ethan and Lizzie prefer not to touch me unless they have to." He paused and tilted his head to one side. "What about you, Severus? Are you volunteering?" he asked, knowing what the answer would be, but he was tired of Severus doing all the poking.

"I brew the potion for you. That's the extent of my charity work," Severus snapped.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you brew the potion for me?" Remus frowned a little in puzzlement, hoping he would get a straight answer from Severus for once. "You never said."

"You never asked."

"I'm asking now," Remus replied in a firm tone. "Why?"

"Why do you think?"

Remus sighed; he wasn't surprised by the evasion, but he wished Severus wouldn't bother with the song and dance over a simple question. "I don't imagine you have developed a strong sense of altruism or a fond affection for me," he said. "If I had to hazard a guess, I would say either Dumbledore asked it of you in his will, or Harry is paying you."

"You don't think I'm capable of altruism?"

"I didn't say that," Remus replied, an edge of frustration in his voice. They were going to end up talking in circles, which he was sure Severus loved, but he did not. "I simply don't think you would do this out of the kindness of your heart for *me*. You certainly haven't given me any reason to believe you would. If anything, I feel like a burden - a chore you have to interrupt your life to take care of each month - and I have enough of that in every other aspect of my life. If it weren't for the fact that I'm not living alone, I would ask you to stop."

Severus let out a derisive snort. "I doubt it. You've always been pathetically grateful for this potion."

"I have been, yes," Remus conceded. "But you of all people should understand the burden of an

unwanted debt which you can never repay."

Silence greeted that remark, and Remus basked in grim satisfaction at having got the last word for once.

"I'll be here at the same time tomorrow, Lupin," Severus rapped out at last. "Whether you like it or not, you must take this potion."

"I know that, Severus." Remus leaned his cheek on his fist, feeling weary in a way he hadn't in weeks. "I don't want to endanger anyone living here, and even a blind werewolf can be dangerous."

"Precisely."

He heard Severus' footsteps fading and the sound of the library door squeaking softly on its hinges as it closed, but it wasn't until he had been alone for several minutes that it occurred to him Severus had never answered his question.

Two days after his transformation, Remus was sitting in his usual chair in the library, but even though there was a book in his lap, he wasn't being read to at the moment. He was lost in thought, still mulling over what Severus had said and wondering if perhaps there was a way he could figure out how to move around on his own without making a complete mess of it or getting lost. Thus he heard the door open this time, and he couldn't stop himself from feeling a surge of hope that was dashed when he heard Harry's light, rapid footsteps.

"Hullo, Harry," he said, mustering a smile.

"How did you know it was me?"

"No one else around here walks like you."

"Oh." There was amusement in Harry's voice as Remus listened to him cross the room and stop near Remus' chair. "I brought you something," he said. "It's not much. Just something I thought you might find useful."

Harry's words were punctuated by a soft, faintly metallic rustling, and Remus cocked his head, frowning as he tried to figure out what it was.

"Here's the first thing," Harry continued, and Remus felt something light and thin pressed into his hand.

"A quill?" He ran his fingers over the object, puzzled why Harry would give him something he couldn't use, but there was no mistaking it for anything else.

"A Dicta-Quill," Harry clarified. "You talk, it writes. It doesn't change anything you say, unlike those stupid quills some reporters use," he added in a darker tone, and Remus wondered what had brought that on. "There's a sheaf of parchment on your desk in your bedroom," he added. "I also got you this."

The thing Harry handed him this time was much bigger, and Remus skimmed both hands along it carefully, startled when the thing suddenly began hooting at him. "An owl?" he asked, realizing he had a cage in his lap.

"He's a little fellow, but he's fast." Harry's voice was full of pride. "I need Hedwig too often to share with all the reports and assignments and such I have to send these days, so I thought you should have your own owl. I know it's difficult for you to get out on your own, but this way, you

can still keep in touch with your friends by letter."

For a moment, Remus wondered if perhaps Severus had said something to Harry, perhaps dropped a hint about Remus' isolation, but he quickly pushed the thought aside. Severus wouldn't have done that; he probably liked the thought of Remus sitting by himself day in and day out.

"Thank you, Harry," he replied, offering a genuine smile this time. "It was very thoughtful of you, and I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Harry said, sounding bashful, and there was a noise as if he was scuffling his feet on the hearth rug. "I want to help if I can, especially since I can't be home much anymore. Between work and Ginny-"

"It's all right," Remus interrupted firmly. "I understand. You're a young man just getting started with your life, and you have important things to do. You aren't obliged to babysit me. I'm an adult, and in spite of my handicap, I can take care of myself."

"I know. It's just..." Harry blew out a sigh. "I don't want you to be lonely and miserable. Ginny and I could spend time here instead of at the Burrow-"

"So you spend your precious free time in the company of your doddering old professor instead of sneaking off to snog when Molly isn't looking? No, that isn't necessary." Remus injecting a lighter note in his voice, hoping to reassure Harry. "I'm fine, and being able to write to people will make things even better."

Although the truth was, once he was upstairs at his desk with the Dicta-Quill activated and ready to write, Remus had no idea to whom he could send a letter. Harry had mentioned writing to his friends, but Remus' friends were all dead. He didn't know anyone else well enough to feel comfortable sending them a chatty letter with the unspoken plea to write to him in return. What if no one else wanted to be bothered with him? He didn't want to send out a lot of pathetic requests for communication only to be met with silence.

He was about to deactivate the quill when a thought occurred to him, and he wrote a brief note to Andromeda, asking if they could arrange a mutually agreeable time for him to visit Teddy. Since she hadn't been answering his calls, perhaps a note would reach her or at least be harder to ignore. He addressed it and prepared it for mailing, although he wasn't overly optimistic about the response, *if* he got a response at all. It was pitiful, he thought, that his life had been reduced to this: no one to write to and no certainty of a response if he did write.

Then again, there might be *one* person to whom he could write.

My dear silent friend,

I apologize for being so harsh the last time you visited. It seems my tongue runs away from me when I'm with you, perhaps because your silence and anonymity make me feel as if it's safe to speak more openly than I would with anyone else. I didn't mean to sound unkind; you've done so much for me, and I am truly grateful, especially for the reading charm.

At the risk of sounding too bold, I wish you would come again. Although our conversations are one-sided, I miss your company. I promise I will hold my tongue and not behave so churlishly next time.

Sincerely,
Remus Lupin

He tapped the letter with his wand to have it read back to him, and, satisfied with its contents, he folded it and went to release his new owl from its cage. "Fezziwig, I want you to deliver these letters. This one is for my silent visitor, all right? I'm sorry I don't know his name, but I hope you will be able to find him anyway."

Fezziwig held out his leg obligingly, and Remus fastened the letter to it, opened the window, and listened to the flap of Fezziwig's wings as he departed. Every hour seemed an eternity while he waited for Fezziwig's return, and while he managed to refrain from pacing, he couldn't concentrate enough to read, the noise of the voice proving to be an irritant rather than a soothing balm.

At long last, Remus heard a tap at the window, and he hurried over to let the little owl in. Fezziwig fluttered over to the desk, and Remus carefully inched his hand along the surface until he felt the rough skin and smooth talons on Fezziwig's claw, and he felt his way up the skinny little leg until he reached a tuft of feathers.

One letter was still attached.

Remus' heart sank as he unfastened it. He'd overestimated the owl post magic, and the one person he thought might be willing to communicate with him was the one person he couldn't reach. He opened the letter and tapped it with his wand to confirm his suspicions, but the words read back to him weren't the ones he'd written to his silent friend. The note he'd sent to Andromeda had been refused, which hurt for an entirely different reason, but it wasn't unexpected. He checked Fezziwig's leg again, but sure enough, only one letter had come back, which meant...

"You did it!" For the first time in months, laughter bubbled to his lips, and he blessed the magic of post owls as he rummaged in the top desk drawer for the bag of owl treats, offering Fezziwig two in thanks for his successful efforts.

Feeling lighter in both heart and spirit, he slipped off his shoes and stretched out on his bed, rolling onto his side and tucking his clasped hands beneath his chin. He wasn't sleepy, and he knew he was too excited to nap, but there was nothing else he wanted to do either. He was too distracted to be read to, and he wanted to remain where any owl bearing a response might easily find him. He knew there was a chance his silent friend might not reply, but he remained optimistic, and after a while, he calmed down and relaxed enough to drift off after all.

He was awakened by the familiar sound of an owl tapping at the window, and he sat up, momentarily disoriented. He could tell by the chill in the room that the daylight had faded, and he murmured a spell to light the fireplace before swinging his legs over the side of the bed and hurrying to the window.

There was a flutter of wings, and Remus listened intently; it sounded as if the owl had decided to share the perch with Fezziwig, and Remus snatched up the bag of owl treats before going to investigate. He felt along the solid wood perch until he found the taloned claw of a much larger owl, and he moved his fingers up, smiling when he found the letter attached to its leg. He unfastened the letter and offered an owl treat. The owl hooted - a haughty sound to Remus' ears - and accepted the treat before taking off, exiting through the open window. A wave of his hand and a charm closed the window again, and Remus returned to his bed, his heart pounding as he clutched the letter in both hands.

Propping up against the pillows, he drew his wand, opened the letter, and tapped it. A male voice - thus confirming Remus' suspicions about his friend's gender - began reading the letter's contents to

him.

"Dear Remus,

You need not apologize. I pushed, and you reacted as you should have. If my silence and anonymity allow you to speak freely, so much the better. You have done yourself more harm than good by not speaking up, but knowing you as I do, it is not difficult to discern why you have insisted on maintaining your own silence.

"You worry overly much about being a burden. You fear if you prove to be an inconvenience, you will be shunted aside. Thus in a misguided attempt to remain amiable and unobtrusive as you have done all your life, you have suffered more than you should have. It is hardly a new pattern, and it is high time you broke it.

"You are also suffering from a malaise of the spirit, what Muggles would term 'depression'. Everything seems far worse than it is, which feeds the downward spiral. There are those who wish to assist you, including young Mr. Potter, but they cannot read your mind and know what you need most. You must overcome your concerns, stop telling everyone you are 'fine', and *ask* for what you want. You were able to do so with me; you ought to be able to do so with others as well.

As for myself, I accept your invitation, and I will visit you tomorrow afternoon.

Your Silent Friend."

Remus let out a breath he scarcely realized he had been holding and let the letter fall from his nerveless fingers, awash in relief. His friend didn't hate him. His friend would return to see him. Life suddenly seemed much better, and he wondered if perhaps his malaise of the spirit was lifting at last.

Over breakfast the next morning, he broached the topic with Harry, wanting to make certain Harry knew about the visit beforehand. His silent friend was someone Harry knew, or else he wouldn't have been invited to the party or given free access to the house, but Remus thought it was best to inform Harry that he was having company nonetheless.

"I sent a letter yesterday," he said once Harry had finished telling a story about being sent to investigate a toilet that had supposedly been hexed in a Muggle restaurant. "I hope you don't mind, but I invited someone to visit."

"Good!" Harry replied, sounding cheerful. "It's time you had some company. Who is it?"

"Er..." Remus bit his bottom lip and hesitated before admitting, "I don't know. It's the silent man who's been here a couple of times already. He hadn't been in a while, and..." He shrugged, uncomfortable with saying more about his motivations behind the invitation. "And I missed him. I thought if I invited him, he would actually come."

"Do you know who it is yet?" Harry asked.

"No, he won't speak," Remus replied, and he heard Harry release a huffing breath.

"I can find out, if you like," Harry offered, but Remus shook his head vehemently.

"If he doesn't want me to know, then I don't want to know. He has reasons, whatever they are, and I respect his privacy." He didn't want to admit anonymity made talking to the man much easier for

him; he knew how bizarre it sounded, and he wasn't sure Harry would understand.

"Why *him*?" Harry sounded bewildered and maybe a little aggravated.

"If you have a problem with whoever he is being in your house..."

"No, no, it isn't that," Harry assured him quickly. "It's just... I don't know. It's weird. You've been here all this time, and you haven't had any company, except some guy who won't say anything. Why don't you invite your friends to visit?"

"Because they're all dead," Remus said quietly, bowing his head. "There are people I would call colleagues or acquaintances from the Order, but there is no one still living whom I would call a friend. There is no one I could invite to visit me and feel certain they would accept."

"There are people who care about you-" Harry protested, but Remus snapped his head up and interrupted sharply.

"Then why did they never visit me when I was recuperating in the hospital? Why have they not visited since I've been here or sent a note to find out how I'm doing? They may care, but not enough to put themselves out for my sake. They may say, 'Oh, poor Remus, it's such a shame', if my name comes up in conversation, but two minutes later, they've moved on to another topic, and I'm forgotten. The only ones who haven't ignored me are you and my silent visitor." Remus knew he ought to still his tongue before he said anything hurtful to Harry, but his emotions were running too high, and the words spilled out in a rush. "I've no idea what his motivation is, but apparently, I'm desperate enough to cling to someone who can't even bring himself to speak to me, and you... Well, I've suspected all along that your primary motivation for keeping me around is that I'm your last remaining connection to James, Lily, and Sirius. It's at times like these when you find out whom your real friends are, and as I said, mine are all dead."

"That isn't true!" Harry retorted hotly. A long pause followed, accompanied by the sound of dishware clinking and restless shuffling, as if Harry was fidgeting with his place setting. "Okay, maybe a little true," he said at last. "I was thinking about them when I visited you and when I invited you to stay here. I thought it was what they'd want me to do, but that makes it sound like I don't care about you as a person at all or like I was taking on a burden I didn't really want, and I didn't mean it like that." There was another silence, and when he spoke again, Harry sounded subdued. "Everybody I know has lost something because of these stupid wars, including me. You lost your job, your friends, your wife, your sight. I just wanted the losses to end, you know? There's been so much in my life I couldn't do anything about, but I could do something to help you."

"And you have," Remus replied, wanting to reassure Harry. He felt chagrined about indulging in a selfish outburst; he had been so focused on his own losses that he'd forgotten there were other people in the world who had suffered too, and Harry's words had been a much needed reminder. "I don't know where I would be if you hadn't taken me in, and I'm grateful."

"I don't want you to be grateful," Harry said, his voice growing stronger again. "That makes it sound like I'm handing out charity, and I'm not. What I want is for you to *live* again, not just exist, and maybe even be happy. It's not impossible."

No, but it's rather improbable, Remus thought, although he didn't voice his thoughts aloud. Harry was still young and apparently still idealistic despite all the trouble and trauma he'd experienced in his short life, and Remus didn't have the heart to disagree with him.

"Anyway, I don't care if you invite this guy over," Harry continued, and Remus heard the scrape of his chair as he pushed it back. "Weird company is better than no company."

"On that, we agree," Remus said, smiling with genuine amusement over Harry's wording.

"Well, that's a first." Harry sounded surprised, but pleased. "Not you agreeing with me," he added quickly. "I mean, you're smiling. I haven't seen you do that since... Well, you know. I hope it means you're getting better."

Startled by that observation, Remus thought about it for a moment, and then he nodded slowly. Things *were* better than they had been, if only a little, but in his position, he had every reason to be grateful for the smallest improvement.

"Perhaps so," he said at last.

Once Harry left for work, Remus made his daily rounds in the conservatory, his spirits lifted enough that he murmured a greeting to each plant as he came to it; he remembered his Herbology professor had advocated talking to plants, but he hadn't felt like bothering with it before. When he was finished, he was at a loss for what to do with himself. He didn't know what time to expect his silent friend to arrive, and he was eager and restless, too much so to settle down and immerse himself in a book. Instead, he wandered around the house for a while, and finally, he made his way to the library, taking refuge in the familiar, comforting scent of leather and old books.

Normally, he sat in one of the chairs by the fireplace, but today, he took a seat in the cozy love-seat so his friend could sit beside him; he rang for Lizzie and asked for a tea tray in case his friend might like some tea or some biscuits, and then there was nothing for him to do but sit, wait, and keep the tea hot.

When he finally heard footsteps that were not Harry's, Lizzie's, or Ethan's, he felt his heartbeat quicken, and he turned to face the approaching steps eagerly. "Is it you?" he asked, stretching out his hand hesitantly. The last time he'd gotten his hopes up, his visitor turned out to be Severus, but this time, his fingers were enclosed in a warm grasp, and he released a soft breath in relief. "Welcome back," he said, a hint of wryness in his voice.

There was no response, of course, but he felt his friend take a seat beside him, and he couldn't help smiling. As Harry had said, weird company was better than none at all, and just knowing *someone* was willing to take the time to visit him lifted his spirits immensely.

"Harry gave me an owl and a Dicta-quill," he said after a few moments of companionable silence. "I hoped Fezziwig would be able to find you since you had sent a message here once before. I don't really know how owl post magic works, so I was grasping at straws, but I'm glad my letter reached you."

His friend squeezed his hand, although he wasn't sure if it was meant as a "yes" response or as reassurance; either way, he squeezed back.

"Thank you for coming," he added. "I won't fall apart like I did last time. Things are better now. Better than I expected they would be, actually, although you were right about the depression. I've had a difficult time of it lately, and I haven't handled things well, I'm afraid." He paused, a soft sigh escaping him. "It's difficult for me to ask for what I need, as you suggested. I know you're right, but it's a deeply ingrained pattern, and I do find it difficult to break." He fell silent, lost in thought for a few moments. "I suppose I don't trust people enough," he mused. "I'm so accustomed to being feared or rejected because of what I am that I don't trust anyone to help. I've always had to muddle through on my own. Always. I suppose I assumed this time would be no different, only this time, I can't do it alone."

He leaned back and relaxed, feeling more at ease despite the oddness of the situation. "I admit, that

bothers me a little. I'm accustomed to being independent, both by nature and necessity. It's galling to find myself in the position of being entirely dependent on other people. It's bad enough I could never repay Severus for providing me with the Wolfsbane Potion even when I still had my sight, but now it goes far beyond being given a potion every month. I want to pull my weight around here if only so I won't feel like a useless charity case, but I've no idea how to go about it. I water the plants. That seems to be about as much help I can offer."

He exhaled a sharp breath and raked his fingers through his hair. "Sorry, I meant to keep the complaining to a minimum, but I find it frustrating to be blocked at every turn. I realize people learn to live full, enriching lives with their disability, but the logistics of it have escaped me so far." He smiled ruefully. "Perhaps I ought to start with not feeling so sorry for myself. Attitude makes a difference, or so I've always heard."

He felt a single squeeze, and he turned his head and smiled at his friend. "All right, then. I'll start looking at the positive side of things. I have a place to live, and I'm not struggling to keep myself fed and clothed. Those are improvements over my former life." He paused, remembering the last year of the war. "Well, things weren't bad after I married Tonks," he amended. "Although I didn't like being supported. It has nothing to do with the idea of a wife supporting her husband, either," he added quickly. "I would have felt the same way if I had chosen to be with a man. I don't care about being the bread-winner, but I do want to contribute my fair share rather than feeling like a dead weight." He shook his head and smiled ruefully. "At any rate, things could be a lot worse, and I do realize that."

He received another squeeze, which he took as agreement, and he smiled as they fell into comfortable silence again; he was content to sit quietly and enjoy the simple pleasure of holding someone's hand. It was a casual gesture that most people took for granted, but it had been one he rarely experienced even before he was blinded; people didn't like touching werewolves, and that his silent friend didn't seem to mind it made the contact doubly soothing.

After a time, he served the tea and chatted about other, less serious topics, but all too soon, his silent friend departed. That his friend had agreed to visit again offered some measure of consolation, but he still felt lonely once the footsteps faded away and he was left alone once more.

Chapter Three

The letter was a pleasant surprise when it arrived two days later. At first, Remus hoped it was from Andromeda, but when he tapped the parchment and a male voice began to speak, his heart sank a little with disappointment. Only when he realized it was a letter from his silent friend did it rise again, and he listened to the words eagerly.

"Dear Remus,

Although you have not indicated you desire communication beyond my visits, I assume from things you have said that correspondence would not be unwelcome. You said things during my last visit that I wish to follow up on, and so I am taking the liberty of writing.

You mentioned being independent, which I fully understand. I prefer to rely on myself rather than others, if only because I trust myself rather than them to follow through and do the job correctly the first time. Given your amiable nature, I was surprised to learn you don't trust people; I had the impression you trusted them too much, but I understand what you meant.

However, old patterns will not serve you well now. There are enough people in your immediate circle of acquaintance who harbor no dislike or prejudice against werewolves or who have come to change their attitude over time, and you needn't remain hindered by fear on that point. As you said, you cannot manage alone anymore, and as difficult and even galling as it may be to do so, you need to speak up.

In fact, I invite you to begin here. Tell me what you need most.

On a more personal note, I find myself curious about something you said. Normally, I wouldn't pry, but you seemed to be implying something, and I wanted clarification. When you said you would have felt the same way if you had chosen to be with a man that you did with Tonks, was that meant rhetorically or were you outing yourself as bisexual?

Your silent friend."

"Oh, *Merlin!*" Remus felt a rush of heat flooding his entire face as realization sank in. It hadn't occurred to him at the time; he had been trying to make it clear that his feelings had nothing to do with traditional gender roles, and he hadn't stopped to think about the implications of what he'd said. Or rather, what he had inadvertently confessed.

Before he could work up the nerve to compose a reply, Harry came to fetch him to dinner, and by the time the meal was over and he returned to his room, he felt less flustered and more capable of answering the question without a lot of disclaimers and prevarication. He sat down at his desk, reached for a fresh sheet of parchment, and activated the Dicta-Quill.

My dear friend,

Thank you for taking my concerns seriously and not dismissing them; it does me more good to hear the words 'I understand' than to hear empty platitudes. You're right, of course. I do need to break my old habits, and I really am going to try to do so. Despite all appearances, I don't want to be miserable. I would have described my old life as difficult, and I had my moments of self-pity and dejection, but on the whole, I didn't feel hopeless or helpless as I have done since I left St. Mungo's. I would happily go back to 'difficult' over 'hopeless'.

As for what I need most, that is simple: something to do that will let me feel genuinely useful. Not only will it let me feel less like a burden, but it will serve as a distraction, something to keep my mind on other than my troubles and something that isn't the unhealthy escapism I have been indulging in. I've been living my life through books - existing rather than living - and that isn't good for me either.

I don't mind if you ask personal questions. It seems I have few secrets from you anyway, which is a novel experience, but one I'm growing to like. To put it bluntly, yes, I'm bisexual. If you know me as you say you do, then no doubt you realize this is a 'secret' on the level of 'yes, I'm a werewolf'. I figured I had enough strikes against me without admitting I fancy men as well, and as little experience as I have with either gender, it seemed like a moot point anyway.

Yours,
Remus

To Remus' surprise, he received a response the next morning, but he slipped the letter into his pocket to reward himself with after he had finished his morning routine around the house. Only then did he sit down on a bench in the conservatory and pull out the letter.

"Dear Remus,

I am not one to dismiss anyone's desire for independence. I share it, thus it would be hypocritical of me to ignore your need in favor of blowing the smoke of willfully ignorant good cheer up your arse. I confess, however, I was surprised you said you wanted something to make you feel useful instead of wanting more company or wanting custody of your son. I haven't forgotten you said Andromeda has been ignoring your attempts to contact her. Is she still ignoring you?

I never would have guessed you as the type to swing both ways. Then again, perhaps I ought not be surprised given how hard you try to accommodate everyone. I did wonder why you resisted Tonks for over a year; I suppose I should have figured it out then. No completely straight man approaching middle age would hold out against a much younger woman throwing herself at him, poor or not, werewolf or not. Either you are far more self-sacrificing than I ever imagined, or you are not as bisexual as you think you are.

Either way, I would not concern myself overly much about keeping it a secret any longer, if I were you. Everyone knows you are a werewolf anyway, and now that the truth about about Dumbledore and Elphias Doge has come out, so to speak, I predict the attitude toward homosexuality - or in your case, bisexuality - will begin to shift toward tolerance.

Sincerely,
your friend."

Remus laughed over the remark about good cheer, loudly enough to startle Fezziwig, who hooted in alarm and shook his feathers hard enough to rattle his cage. Still smiling, Remus set about composing his response. Perhaps it was foolish and desperate of him not to wait a little while before writing back, but he didn't see the point in waiting. His friend knew he was eager for companionship, and he certainly didn't have more pressing matters to attend to.

My dear friend,

You asked what I needed most, and to me, the answer was clear. I need something to occupy my time, not only to help me feel useful, but also to help me forget that I do get lonely sometimes and that I miss my son dearly. I wrote to Andromeda on the same day I wrote to you for the first time. The letter came back unopened, and I haven't attempted to contact her since. I don't know what else to do. When she came to me in the hospital, she promised she would let me visit Teddy regularly if I agreed to give her custody. She had someone from the Ministry with her, and they both kept saying I had to give him up because I couldn't take care of him. I suspected if I hadn't agreed, she would have threatened legal action. Why else bring a Ministry official?

Even if I thought I could take care of Teddy, I knew I couldn't afford to engage in a legal battle with her. I may be his biological father, but all she had to do was point out how unfit a werewolf is to raise a child. Add poverty and blindness on top of that, and she would have had an air-tight case. In our society, I suspect the rights of the natural parent mean little if the natural parent is a poor, disabled werewolf.

If Harry hadn't taken me in, I don't know where I would have gone or what I would have done. Tonks didn't have much, but what she did leave was set aside for Teddy, so after she died, I was back in the same position I was in before we married: no job, no income, no hope of employment.

I want my son back. If I could, I would fight for him, but I can't impose on Harry's generosity by bringing a baby into the house, and I can't afford to live on my own, much less raise a child. I'm not even sure how I would manage without help; the problems and dangers of a blind parent with a small child scare me just thinking about them.

If you want to know what else I need, I can give you a prioritized list:

1. I need a job that will allow me to feel useful and to be independent, which includes the possibility of moving into my own home and fighting a custody battle with Andromeda.
2. I need my son. Ideally, he would be first on the list, but I'm practical enough to realize I need money before I can attempt to get him back.
3. I need a means of getting around that doesn't force me to rely on other people so I can leave the house once in a while without feeling like I'm going to trip, fall, bump into everyone, or get hit by a car.
4. I need companionship. Not charity visits to poor, blind Remus, but time spent with someone who genuinely desires my company. Of course, I probably need to stop being such a sad sack first. Despite my flexible preferences, I'm not holding out hope for a lover; I'll be perfectly happy to have a friend or two I can visit and who will visit me.

Thinking back on what I've just said, I'm not sure whether to be amused or appalled by the fact that I'm not asking for anything outrageous. What I want is what most people take for granted - a job, a home, a family, friends - yet which I've struggled for my entire life. Perhaps I ought to be angry instead. I've never felt inclined toward activism, but perhaps I should start. What have I got to lose, after all?

I think outing myself as bisexual is a moot point, given the unlikelihood of me having a lover, but I suppose there isn't any reason to hide it any longer. What can they do - discriminate against me worse than they already do? That seems impossible.

As usual, you have given me much to think about, and I appreciate it.

Yours,
Remus

Two days passed without a response, and Remus began to fret that perhaps he had been too harsh or too outspoken, but on the third day, his silent friend responded in person, pushing a letter into Remus' hand once they had sat down on the love-seat in the library. To Remus' surprise, his friend didn't simply clasp his hand as normal, but this time, he laced his fingers with Remus', and Remus felt a warm flush washing over him, the sort of tingling awareness he hadn't experienced in far too long.

Clearing his throat, he forced himself to focus on the letter instead, opening it one-handed and tapping it with his wand.

"Dear Remus,

I have been informed by a reliable source that you should be receiving a monthly pension from the Ministry due to your status as a war veteran and as the widower of an Auror. An investigation as to why you have not yet received anything is underway. I doubt it will be much, but it will be a first step on your path to independence.

If you ask me, it is past time you grew angry about any number of things. You have been passive and accepting of your lot for too long, and look where it got you. Were you any happier or better off for not fighting? No.

I cannot give you everything you need single-handedly, but what I can do - and have been doing - is research the available options. If my efforts prove fruitful, you may receive word of it soon. In the meantime, I *can* provide companionship, and I assure you, I am not doing so out of pity or obligation. However, you are on your own when it comes to procuring other friends.

Sincerely,
your friend."

Remus shifted in his seat so he faced his friend, and he smiled widely. "Thank you," he said softly. "It doesn't matter whether you succeed in helping me or not. The mere fact that you're trying means more than I can express. You already *have* helped me, in fact. Listening, understanding, accepting - it's rare I experience these with anyone, but I have with you."

He felt a hand cup his cheek, and without stopping to think about the wisdom of it, he leaned into the touch, relishing the warmth of human contact. His friend stroked his cheek gently, the caress making Remus' toes curl despite his best efforts to remain neutral. It had been so long since anyone had touched him like this, and his skin was starved, soaking up the attention greedily. His breath hitched and quickened, and he had to fight the urge to reach out in return in a way that wasn't entirely platonic.

He didn't need to see to know his friend was watching him; he could feel the weight of his friend's gaze, and he found himself swaying closer, wishing his friend would close the distance between them. He was aware of how odd it was that he was willing - eager, even - to kiss someone whose name he didn't know. The letters had made it clear his friend *did* know him, but it was still strange, almost like picking up a nameless stranger.

Then again, Remus had bared his secrets to his friend more than he had to anyone else, and in that sense, his friend wasn't a stranger at all. In some ways, they had been more intimate than he'd been

with his own wife, and he couldn't deny that his friend's touch stirred his desire.

He could feel his friend's presence hovering close, and he reached out hesitantly, wanting to touch him, but not wanting to do something clumsy and stupid like poke him in the eye; he decided to play it safe and rested his hand on his friend's leg, squeezing gently to offer encouragement.

"Please," he whispered, hoping he wasn't making a colossal mistake that would cause his friend to recoil in horror, hoping he didn't sound too needy and desperate.

But then he felt the firm press of warm, thin lips against his own, and a low moan escaped him as he parted his lips willingly, inviting the exploration of his friend's tongue when it slipped between them. He couldn't remember a more thorough, leisurely kiss; it almost seemed as if his friend was as hungry for the contact as he was himself. The feel of his friend's fingers tightening in his hair wrenched a groan from his throat, and he yielded his mouth, offering it - offering *himself* - and sucking on his friend's tongue with the desperation of a starving man at a banquet.

When his friend drew back at last, Remus was breathless, and his body had come alive, tingling with energy and arousal. He didn't want to stop at snogging; he wanted to wallow, skin-on-skin, and glut himself on the taste and scent and feel of his friend's body, but his stomach clenched with apprehension at the thought of voicing his desires aloud. Still, hadn't his friend been the one who said he ought to ask for what he wanted?

"Will you..." He licked his lips, hoping he didn't look as nervous as he felt. "Would you like to go to my room? I'd like to do more than kiss you, but not here. Someone could walk in."

The next thing he knew, he was being hauled to his feet, and he laughed as he tucked his arm through his friend's and led the way out of the library and upstairs to his room. His heart was lighter, just knowing his friend wanted him too, and as soon as they were safely in his bedroom with the door closed and locked behind them, he slid his arms around his friend's shoulders and pressed close, eager for more.

His friend seemed to be just as eager, for he wasted no time in plundering Remus' mouth anew while walking Remus toward the bed; the next thing he knew, his clothes had been stripped away by what must have been wordless magic, and his friend silently urged him onto the bed, a request he obeyed with alacrity, waiting with growing need and anticipation for his friend to join him.

He didn't have to wait long before he felt warm skin sliding against his own as his friend settled atop him, and Remus hooked one leg around his friend's hips, wanting to keep him close. His control grew ever more tenuous as his friend launched an all-out assault on his senses; his friend's lips and teeth and hands seemed to be everywhere, stroking, lapping, nipping until Remus thought he might go mad. Everything seemed far more intense, every touch awakening his skin and sending fresh ripples of arousal along his nerves. The rush of sensation combined with the heady scent of desire rising from his friend's sweat-damp skin was overwhelming, winding Remus tighter and tighter until he thought he might come untouched for the first time in his life.

"Yes, yes..." The words were little more than moans, but he tried to articulate his pleasure and approval as best he could, clinging to his friend's back, his fingers digging in as he felt the preparation charms take effect, as he felt his friend position himself, as he felt the blunt nudge of his friend's cock at his entrance. "Yes, *please* - do it - fuck me - I need it - need you..." He was babbling, but he didn't care. All he cared about was getting his friend's cock inside him at last, and he bent his knees and spread his legs - and then his friend thrust hard and deep, and Remus gave a wordless shout of pleasure at the welcome invasion.

It was rough, and Remus loved it. He rocked beneath his friend, wanting to meet and match each

thrust, wanting to send him deeper, wanting to make the headboard bang against the wall even harder as his friend pounded into him. The slap of flesh echoed in his ears, heightening his arousal to the point of madness; he could hear the harmony of their labored breathing, punctuated by moans and grunts, could feel the muscles flexing in his lover's body, could feel the shock of pleasure as his lover stroked the sweet spot within him with each thrust, and when his lover came, so did he, warm fluid spattering his stomach even as his body was relentlessly rocked by his lover's last demanding, diminishing thrusts.

"Dear Merlin..." Remus remained sprawled on his back, sucking air into his starved lungs as his heartbeat gradually slowed to its normal pace. "That was *brilliant*."

The only response he got was a deep, leisurely kiss, and he rolled into it, winding his arms around his lover and shifting closer. The desperation was gone now, leaving only tenderness behind as the kiss continued, which was just as satisfying as the sex had been. Perhaps even more satisfying.

"Stay with me for a while," he murmured when they broke apart at last. "Can you? Will you?"

He felt the tingle of a cleaning charm wash over him, and then his lover nudged him to roll onto his side; as soon as he did, he felt a warm body press against his back, and he breathed out a contented sigh as he nestled close. Now that he wasn't caught up in the heat of passion, he could tell his lover was lean rather than stocky, and with his lover curled around him, he became aware of a difference in their heights. He tried to remember the men of his acquaintance who were taller than he was, but he was finding it more difficult to remember specific physical details about the people he knew, and since he was average height himself, he didn't think he could narrow down the field by much.

But all thoughts of his lover's identity fled when he felt the weight of his lover's arm thrown across his waist and his lover's thigh insinuated between his legs, signaling his lover's intention to stay. Drowsy and sated, he let himself relax and drift off at last.

When he awoke, it was to a knocking on his door, and he sat up abruptly, groping around the bed to see if his lover was still there; he was a little disappointed to realize he was alone.

"Who is it?" he called.

"It's Harry! Time for dinner!"

"I'll be down in a few minutes," Remus replied, already swinging his bare legs over the side of the bed. He felt relaxed and deliciously sore, and he stretched leisurely before strolling to the wardrobe to get dressed. Even though his lover had left without waking him, he wasn't worried; he felt certain this wasn't going to change things between them, at least not for the worse.

His good mood continued throughout the evening, and that night, he returned to his rumpled bed and crawled in, dragging a pillow under his head and breathing deeply in hopes of catching a lingering whiff of his lover's scent. When he was awakened this time, it was to the sound of owl talons scrabbling against glass, and he stumbled over to open the window, yawning and bleary. He scrounged for an owl treat and took the letter, wondering who was writing to him in the middle of the night. He'd asked Harry's permission to take a clock from one of the unused rooms, and it chimed one o'clock as he returned to bed to read the letter.

What he heard woke him up more effectively than ice water dashed in his face.

"Dear Remus,

I should wait to send this tomorrow morning, but I will have no peace of mind until I write this

down and send it off. It didn't occur to me until much later, and once the thought entered my mind, I could not shake it. Thus I need to know: did you have sex with me as a means of repaying me for what I have done for you? I did not accept your offer because I wanted some form of gratitude or reimbursement; I accepted because I desired you, nothing more. I want to think you felt the same, but in hindsight, I cannot be certain.

Sincerely,
your friend."

Remus was wide awake now, and he hurried over to his desk to write a reply; he suspected his lover would still be awake, hoping for a response, and he didn't want to make his lover wait until morning to know the truth.

My dear friend,

I wasn't thinking about gratitude or repayment when I invited you into my bedroom. All I was thinking about was you and how much I wanted you. I know it's odd, considering I still don't know who you are, but it doesn't matter to me. I may not know your name, but I know you from the way you have treated me. You're a good man and a good friend. You're also a good lover, for the record.

From your reactions, I got the impression that you needed to touch and be touched just as much as I did, and while the circumstances may be unorthodox, I don't see anything wrong in what we shared. It wasn't about paying back a debt; it was about mutual need and desire, and I would like it to happen again.

Yours,
Remus

Remus understood why his lover was concerned after the things Remus had said about feeling the weight of debt on his shoulders, but he had never stooped to bartering himself before, no matter how bad things got; it was just as much of a relief to him to have his belief in their mutual desire confirmed as it probably was to his lover, and he wasn't at all surprised when his lover visited him the next day and wasted no time in kissing him until he could scarcely breathe.

Over the next few days, Remus settled into a contented state. He had a secure place to live, plenty of books to read, and sex on a regular basis, all of which he once would have considered luxuries. His lover visited more often, and they exchanged letters in-between; in bed, his lover was insatiable, as if he too had been denied the pleasures of the flesh for too long, but Remus was happy to indulge him. He learned not to touch his lover above the shoulders, but he was free to explore all he liked from the shoulders down, and he did, mapping his lover's body thoroughly with his hands and lips until he thought he had a more vivid mental image than he would have if he could have seen what he was doing.

He was amazed by how much information he could obtain through his other senses, and he began to appreciate the heightened clarity. He might not be able to see his lover's face, but he could recognize his lover's scent, his touch, and even his footsteps, although admittedly, he still got his lover confused with other visitors - especially Severus - if he went on footsteps alone, which he assumed was because he didn't hear them as often as he heard Harry's, Lizzie's, and Ethan's.

Things were better, and Remus was far more content than he ever expected to be with his new life, for which he was grateful. He didn't aim so high as to hope for happiness; life had taught him to set lower goals if he wanted any chance of reaching them, but he didn't give up hope, either. His lover's encouragement had spurred him to begin thinking about realistic changes he could make, things that were within plausible reach; he'd even been toying with the idea of writing to Minerva and asking if there was any chance he could teach at Hogwarts again after reading in the *Daily Prophet* that the Ministry were reviewing the anti-werewolf employment laws. If the laws were revoked, new doors would open for Remus, doors he had considered forever closed and locked.

But before he made the decision about contacting Minerva, Remus received an unexpected visitor. He was in the conservatory when he heard footsteps; he turned instinctively, hoping perhaps his lover had stopped by even though it was unlikely since he'd received a letter that morning.

"Hello, Remus." Kingsley's warm, deep voice greeted him rather than his lover's familiar touch, which was disappointing, but he mustered a smile nonetheless.

"Hello, Kingsley. I'm sorry, but Harry isn't here right now," he replied politely as he returned the watering can to the shelf and felt for a trowel and some potting soil. Neville had dropped off some pots and asked Remus to prepare them so they would be ready when he brought in new plants later that week, and Remus continued with his work, assuming Kingsley would leave now that he knew Harry wasn't home. Remus remembered what had happened the last time Kingsley stopped by, and he had no intention of repeating that humiliating experience.

"I'm not here to see Harry," Kingsley replied. "I'm here to see you."

Remus stilled his hands and turned his head toward Kingsley, surprised and more than a little curious; his stomach clenched as the thought occurred to him that Andromeda might have done something, perhaps tried to take away Remus' status as Teddy's legal parent. "Oh?" he asked guardedly. "About what?"

"About some changes I'm making at the Ministry," Kingsley replied, and Remus' shoulders sagged with relief that it had nothing to do with Teddy. "To be specific, I'm restructuring some areas," he continued, and Remus moved away from the shelf and closer to the sound of Kingsley's voice as he listened. "I want to create a Werewolf Division, something along the lines of the Spirit Division. I believe that would be easier for werewolves, and it would consolidate resources that were previously divided between the Being Division and the Beast Division. I also want to expand the Werewolf Support Services."

"I think that's a sensible idea," Remus said, nodding. One of the - many! - frustrating things about dealing with the Ministry had always been being shuttled back and forth between the Beast and Being Divisions, told to report to one and then to the other and never really getting anything in the way of help or answers at all. "From my own experience, I have to say the support services weren't very supportive or helpful."

"I know," Kingsley replied. "But that needs to change. The Ministry have been operating from the standpoint of wizard superiority for far too long, and that helped You Know Who gain a foothold, especially with the magical creatures our society has oppressed for so long, including werewolves. It isn't any wonder they sided with him when they were treated like pariahs."

"You're preaching to the choir," Remus said dryly, folding his arms across his chest, and Kingsley chuckled.

"Yes, you know better than anyone what it's been like, which is why I want you to help me organize the Werewolf Division and turn it into something genuinely useful. Once it's ready, I

want you to work there."

Remus felt his jaw drop, and he snapped it shut as he tried not to boggle. "But the laws..."

"Those laws will soon be repealed," Kingsley said firmly. "They never should have been passed in the first place. They were born of the kind of narrow-minded thinking that got us into this mess, and it's time for a fresh start. Besides, who is better equipped to help werewolves than werewolves themselves? You won't be the only one hired, I assure you."

"I'll do it," Remus said with a decisive nod. He couldn't possibly turn down this opportunity, not when it was exactly what he'd needed; he would have a real job, and in helping other werewolves, he would be doing something genuinely useful, not occupying his time with busy work. "When can I start?"

"Monday," Kingsley replied, and to Remus' pleased surprise, he clasped Remus' hand and shook it firmly to seal the bargain. "Just so you know, I've spoken with Harry about this already, and he's given me some idea of what we need to do. You'll go in with him at first, and he'll walk you to the Werewolf Division until you feel ready to make it on your own. I've assigned you an office, and everyone on staff will be informed not to move anything in there or in the areas where you'll be walking around most often. On Monday, I've arranged a meeting for you with one of the most well-organized people I know, and he'll help you arrange your office so you'll know where everything is. Does that suit?"

"It does." Remus smiled, pleased to learn he would be able to do his job with a great deal of independence. "Thank you."

"Not at all. I need your insight for this, especially since you've tried to integrate into wizarding society far more than most werewolves do. You know exactly what they need not only to integrate, but to prosper. The days of consigning werewolves to a life of poverty and isolation are over. I promise you that."

Remus didn't think he could receive any news better than that - until that weekend when Harry cheerfully informed him that he would be starting a class on working with a seeing eye dog soon.

"You'll need Muggle clothes," Harry said, chattering on happily while Remus stood there, dumbstruck. "Hermione did all the research and enrolled you. There's a school in Redbridge where you'll take classes on working with the dog, although you've got to find the right one first, of course. She said they're picky about matching up the dogs with the right person, so I thought we could check out the dogs this afternoon, if you're interested."

Remus *was* interested, and somehow, it turned into a group outing, because Hermione insisted on accompanying them since she was the most informed about the organization, Ginny wanted to see the dogs, and Ron tagged along because everyone else was going. Remus was introduced to several dogs by a kind woman named Kate who seemed happy to answer his endless questions, although sometimes Hermione piped up with the answer before Kate did.

Although Remus loved animals and greeted each new dog with enthusiasm, he didn't feel drawn toward one more than another, and he wondered how he could possibly make a decision. Then Kate brought out another dog.

"This is Polly," she said. "She's a black Labrador just out of training, and she's a lovely, sweet girl."

Remus knelt and stretched out his hand, offering it to Polly to sniff - and got a swipe of a broad, wet tongue right in the face instead. He could hear her panting happily as she tried to climb into his lap

as if she was a shih-tzu instead of a full grown Lab, and as he wrapped his arms around her sturdy body, he knew he'd found the one.

"I think we have a match," Kate said before Remus could say anything, and she sounded both pleased and amused.

"She's gorgeous," Ginny cooed. "She looks so happy!"

"They both do," Harry replied.

Remus buried his face against Polly's coarse fur and said nothing, feeling incapable of speaking when his throat was closed up tight and his emotions were running high. He found it difficult to believe things had changed so much since that time not so long ago when he was letting himself die in increments, too hopeless to go on; that dark time seemed like a lifetime ago, and he was relieved and grateful it was behind him. He was more than content now, and only one thing stood between himself and complete happiness, but with the way things were going, he had renewed hope that he could regain custody of Teddy once he saved enough money to prove he could provide for Teddy just as well as Andromeda could.

On Monday, Harry took Remus to work with him, and for once, Remus didn't feel self-conscious even though he was holding Harry's arm as well as using his cane to avoid obstacles. In part, he was engrossed in counting steps and trying to orient himself to the new sounds and the feel of the space around him, but mostly, he was excited about what lay ahead. He couldn't wait to get started, and he was pleased when Kingsley arrived in his office shortly after he did. They spent the morning discussing ideas for the Werewolf Division, and that afternoon, Percy Weasley arrived to help him arrange his office. He was amused at first, although not terribly surprised, and he was also quite satisfied; Percy devised a system of organization that was both efficient and easy for Remus to remember, and being able to find things without a lot of guessing and groping raised Remus' confidence immensely.

By the end of the day, he was tired, but in a good way, and he felt more useful, more *normal* than he had in weeks. Harry picked him up, and over dinner, Remus chattered happily about what he'd done that day, for once having something to contribute to the mealtime conversation. Fortunately, Harry didn't seem to mind, and he added his support and encouragement for the new Division.

"It's about time," he remarked, and Remus fervently agreed.

The days began to pass quickly; scarcely had the week begun when it was over, and Remus was scheduled to attend his first class with Polly on Saturday morning. He had an entourage accompany him again, much to his amusement, although he didn't mind at all; they were learning new things just as he was, and he could only see that as a good thing.

They celebrated his first class with lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, and he got pleasantly buzzed on elf-made wine. Harry saw him back to Grimmauld Place and went off to spend the rest of the day with Ginny, and he decided to check the conservatory and find out if Neville had brought the new plants yet. He hummed softly as he made his way to the conservatory, mentally composing a letter to his lover; he wanted to share the good news, and he didn't know when his lover might visit again.

He found out while he was making certain the roses weren't getting too dry; he heard familiar footsteps and straightened, but before he could speak, he found himself with his back against the nearest wall and a lean body pressed against him. Moaning, he surrendered to the deep, demanding kiss that followed, and he wound his arms around his lover's shoulders, breathing deeply of his lover's scent. All thoughts of plants and good news fled under the onslaught of arousal, and he

tipped his head back with a groan, offering better access as his lover trailed nipping kisses along his throat.

"Harry is gone," he murmured, sliding his hands down the length of his lover's back and squeezing his lover's firm arse. "Lizzie and Ethan have the day off. You could bend me over a table and fuck me right here if you wanted to."

He heard a sharp intake of breath, and he felt his lover's cock stir and harden against him; he smiled and rocked his hips, wickedly pleased by his lover's response. He had read the signals and figured out that his lover liked it when he said naughty things, perhaps because it reinforced the fact that he desired his lover or perhaps because his lover liked hearing calm, collected Remus Lupin begging to be fucked. Either way, Remus was happy to oblige.

The sound of approaching footsteps alerted Remus to an impending interruption, but before they could step away from each other, he heard what sounded like an alarmed squeak.

"Oh, Merlin! I'm sorry!" Neville gasped, but before Remus could assure him there was no need to be embarrassed, he spoke again. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I didn't know Professor Snape was here."

Remus froze, his insides turned to ice. "Severus?" he whispered, scarcely able to believe his lover - his understanding, passionate lover - was *Severus*. If he'd been forced to guess, Severus' name would have been the last one on his list, and he scarcely knew what to think.

"*Fuck.*"

It was one muttered word, but it was more than enough to confirm his lover's identity; there was no mistaking Severus' voice for anyone else's, despite the damage it had taken. But before Remus could react, Severus pushed him away and stormed off, leaving him alone and bewildered.

"Remus?" Neville asked hesitantly. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I - I just didn't know!"

"It's all right," Remus replied soothingly as he drew himself up and smoothed his hands down the front of his robes. "It's a long story, and I'm not sure I understand it myself."

He went through the motions of helping Neville pot the new plants, but his mind was in turmoil the entire time as he tried to sort through the tangled web of thought and emotion. He never kept track of Harry's comings and goings, but that night, he waited for Harry to arrive, ready to pounce with questions.

"Did you know who he really was?" he demanded.

"What?" Harry sounded startled and bewildered, much as Remus had been earlier. "Who are you talking about?"

"My visitor." Remus clasped his hands together tightly and fought the urge to pace. "Did you know it was Severus?"

There was a long pause followed by a ragged exhalation. "Yeah," Harry admitted at last. "Not at first, but when you told me you'd invited him to visit, I wanted to know in case there was something weird going on. I didn't want you to be hurt or used, and when I found out it was Snape, well, we had a discussion. A long one. So did he finally tell you?"

"No, Neville walked in and blurted it out." Remus raked his fingers through his hair and released a

sharp breath. "I was shocked, to say the least."

"I'll bet." Harry sounded sympathetic, and he rested his hand on Remus' shoulder, a warm and comforting weight. "Look, if it's any consolation, he said he wasn't playing a game with you, and I believe him. I don't know why he did it. I'm not even sure *he* knows why he did it, but I don't think there was anything malicious about it, or I wouldn't have let him keep coming 'round. For what it's worth, he's done a lot to help you."

"Yes, I know," Remus said softly. "He sent the reading charm."

"Right, and he's the one who told me you were lonely and suggested getting you an owl. The Dicta-quill was Ginny's idea. We've all been kind of working with Snape for a while now. He told us the problems, and we tried to figure out how to fix them. Ron and I went to Kingsley to talk about maybe revoking the employment laws, and from there, it snowballed into him deciding the system for registering and helping werewolves was stupid and setting up a separate division. Then Hermione started researching seeing eye dogs. All of that happened because of Snape." Harry squeezed Remus' shoulder and let his hand fall away again. "I'm not Snape's biggest fan, but I have to give him credit this time."

"Thank you for telling me." Remus mustered a wan smile and shook his head. "It seems I have a lot to think about."

That night, he lay in bed, unable to sleep. His mind raced, swinging back and forth from wanting to trust Severus to being terrified that it had been nothing but some kind of elaborate revenge. Except how could it be revenge if everything was *benefiting* Remus in the end? Certainly Severus could have revealed his identity and ended their sexual relationship, and that would have hurt, but Remus would still have a job and a seeing eye dog even if he wasn't enjoying fabulous sex on a regular basis any longer.

And that was another thing, he mused as he stacked his hands beneath his head and thought about all the times they had shagged in that very bed. Sex between them had been good. *Very* good. The quality had gone beyond technical proficiency, however; he had always felt that his lover was grounded in the moment and not thinking about anything other than fucking Remus' brains out. Severus hadn't been able to hide the way his body had responded either, not from a blind man more acutely attuned to touch. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that it hadn't been pity fucking or revenge fucking or anything other than Severus wanting him.

The question that remained was whether Remus wanted Severus now that he knew he'd been shagging Severus all this time.

Chemistry wasn't an issue, he thought wryly as he remembered how many times he'd been thoroughly fucked of late. On his back, on his hands and knees, on top, against the wall, bent over the mattress, semi-naked, totally naked - every way conceivable. And he'd enjoyed every minute of it. No, he couldn't deny that he and Severus were compatible in bed. He wasn't certain they were compatible out of it, however.

He supposed it depended on how Severus intended to treat him now that the truth was out. If he was snarky and needled Remus every chance he got... But was that really so bad? He remembered feeling more lively after one of Severus' visits just after he was released from St. Mungo's; Severus had challenged him and forced him to think, and looking back, he wondered if Severus' motives were as malicious as he'd assumed or if Severus had been trying, in his own round-about way, to goad Remus out of his self-pitying gloom.

Then there was the question of the letters. Was that a ruse or had Remus been given a glimpse at

another side of Severus? He remembered the late night letter, a plea for reassurance, and he thought... No, he *knew* it was real. Severus was human and had his own demons and doubts just like everyone else; Severus was clever and manipulative, yes, but Remus thought he probably drew the line at exposing his own vulnerabilities for the sake of exacting revenge on an old enemy.

It seemed like no time before Remus heard the chirping of morning birds outside his window, and he realized he'd lain awake all night, trying to make sense of the situation. But the only person who had the answers he needed was Severus himself, and so Remus rolled out of bed and went to his desk to write a letter.

Dear Severus,

We need to talk. I'm not angry, and I'm not going to hex you, but I do have questions. I'll be home all day today. Please come by at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,
Remus

He sent Fezziwig off with the note and went to bathe and dress so he wouldn't look like an unkempt mess if Severus did come to see him. At breakfast, Harry kept the conversation steered well away from anything that might lead back to Severus, but there was a pensiveness in his voice that told Remus he was worried. Perhaps he feared the incident would cast Remus back into depression, but Remus doubted it would. He would be hurt and disappointed if Severus had indeed betrayed him, but losing his silent friend-turned-lover wouldn't leave him alone, empty, and devoid of hope; if Severus *had* wanted revenge, he should have taken it before Remus got a job and a dog.

After breakfast, Remus took care of the plants and went to the library; he selected a novel, one of his old favorites, and curled up on one end of the love-seat, but while the book lay open in his lap, he didn't activate the reading charm. Instead he leaned his cheek on his fist and lost himself in thought.

He was startled out of his reverie by approaching footsteps, and he sat up straight and put his book aside. "Hello, Severus," he said softly.

"How did you know it was me?" Severus asked, and Remus smiled.

"No one around here walks like you," he replied, giving Severus the same answer he'd once given Harry.

"You mean I could have given myself away with *footsteps*?" Severus sounded annoyed, likely with himself for overlooking such an important detail.

"Well, it does explain why I kept getting confused when you brought the Wolfsbane Potion," Remus said lightly. He felt the shift of weight in the cushions that let him know Severus had sat down beside him, and he stretched out his hand toward Severus. For a long moment, there was nothing but silence, but then he felt the familiar warmth of his lover's fingers curled around his own, and it made a little knot loosen in his chest. "So it was you all along." It wasn't a question, but he hoped it would serve as an opening.

"Yes."

"Why?"

There was another lengthy silence, and then Severus released a long, quiet breath. "I don't know. That night at the party, I suppose I felt... responsible for pushing you too far. I wanted to needle you into getting off your arse and enjoying the party, not make you run away from it, so I followed you. Either I was drunk or temporarily insane," he continued in a dry tone that made Remus chuckle. "Whatever the reason, I decided to help you. The way you reacted told me two things. One, you found it easier to accept help when you didn't know who was offering it. Two, you needed the help desperately."

"Did you really think I was that bad?" Remus asked, surprised by the observation.

"If you could have seen yourself the way Potter and I saw you, you would know the answer to that," Severus replied tartly. "You were little more than a shell, one that was withering away a little more every day."

"I never imagined you would care if I did shrivel up and die," Remus said, shifting to face Severus. He strove to keep his tone neutral, not wanting Severus to think he was hurling accusations, and he tightened his grip on Severus' hand. "I thought you hated me and took pleasure in the fact that I'd been broken."

"No." Severus fell silent once more until Remus began to wonder if he needed to prod Severus for elaboration on that point, and he desperately wished he could see Severus' face and observe the play of emotion in his eyes and on his sharp features. "There was a time when I hated you," Severus continued at last. "But the end of the war, being free, nearly dying and coming back to a second chance - these things made my perspective undergo a significant shift. After two wars and too many losses, I thought there had been enough suffering. I was tired of being associated with death. I wanted to contribute to life for a change, and I thought perhaps if I could help you, it would balance the scales a little."

"Balancing the scales doesn't necessarily entail shagging," Remus pointed out.

"But it was a pleasant perk," Severus replied, coaxing another chuckle from Remus. "I didn't plan to have sex with you. *You* started it, and by that time, I had reached the point where your advances weren't unwelcome," he added, which made Remus laugh outright.

"Only you would put it that way," Remus said, shaking his head. "Careful! If you keep turning my head with more flattery like that, I may throw myself at you again."

Severus gave a quiet snort. "I hope you didn't expect me to spout some drivel along the lines of carrying a secret torch for you all these years or having had some Scrooge-like epiphany that made me dance in the streets. Nearly dying convinced me to drop some old baggage, and you happened to benefit from it, that's all."

"Where does that leave us now?" Remus asked softly. "Harry told me how much you did to help me, and I'm grateful, but I had come to rely on my silent friend as a confidante. I trusted you more than I've trusted anyone in a long time, and yes, the sex was indeed a pleasant perk. I think *you* benefited from that as much as I did. Your body doesn't lie even when your tongue doesn't speak."

Severus cleared his throat. "You aren't wrong," he admitted gruffly. "As for where we are now, I don't know. What do you want?"

The evasion wasn't surprising; Remus knew better than to expect Severus to make himself vulnerable unless he knew he was safe in doing so. Perhaps, he thought, that was part of the allure

of letting himself become involved with Remus. As long as he maintained his silence, there was no baggage, and the weight of their antagonistic history was lifted; he was free to relax with Remus as he could with no one else. Remus kept that speculation to himself, however; he didn't want to risk making Severus turn prickly and defensive.

"I want..." Remus drew in a deep breath. What did he want? Was it worth taking a chance with Severus and seeing how things developed? "I want my friend and lover back, only with vocalization this time," he said at last. "Is that an option?"

Remus knew the answer as soon as Severus twined their fingers, even before Severus spoke. "It could be. Yes."

"Good," Remus replied, smiling as he leaned closer, hoping Severus would take the hint.

Ten minutes later, Remus was once more on his back in his own bed, his legs hooked over Severus' shoulders as Severus moved slowly within him, a shallow thrust-and-hold over and over and over that was threatening to drive him mad. He reached up to touch Severus' face, and this time, Severus didn't push his hand away; he trailed his fingertips across the span of Severus' forehead and traced the length of his nose and the outline of his thin lips. Severus had thicker eyebrows and a stronger chin than Remus remembered, and his cheekbones were high and sharp.

"It's a good face," Remus whispered, earning a harder, deeper thrust that made his toes curl, and he groaned with frustration as he slid his hands down to Severus' shoulders and clutched them tightly. "God, Severus, will you stop teasing and fuck me, *please*?"

"You're quite demanding for someone flat on his back with a cock up his arse," Severus said even as he pulled back and thrust deep again.

"Haven't you ever heard the phrase 'pushy bottom'?" Remus teased, but Severus made him pay for it by bending him nearly in half and fucking him harder, pounding into him roughly, relentlessly, making him cry out and beg for more.

He lost himself in a haze of sweaty skin and musky desire, of overwhelming heat and need that threatened to consume him; he yielded willingly to the demands of Severus' passion, echoing Severus' cry when he felt Severus' final, powerful surge, and he whimpered a soft protest when Severus pulled out, not wanting to lose the connection. But then Severus pushed his legs apart and engulfed his cock with wet heat, and Remus groaned with pleasure and buried his fingers in Severus' hair as Severus led him to orgasm with ease, working his cock with lips and tongue until Remus shouted and came, his hips snapping up in the throes of release.

Later, when they were cleaned up and Severus was pressed against Remus' back as he always was after sex, Remus drew Severus' arm more tightly around himself and smiled.

"It's better this way," he murmured. "I'm not fond of one-sided conversations. It's better when you talk back."

"You say that *now*," Severus nuzzled the back of his neck, making him shiver pleasurably.

"Foolish of me, I know, especially since you won't let me forget I said it."

"Of course not. I'll trot it out after every quarrel and every time you get exasperated or annoyed by my needling."

"It's still better than silence," Remus replied, nestling back against Severus and relaxing with a soft, contented sigh. "It's better than being alone in the dark."

For that, Severus had no response other than a gentle squeeze of Remus' hand, which was enough.

In the days that followed, Remus continued his training classes and worked diligently on helping Kingsley with the Werewolf Division. He had finally begun receiving his pension, which he set aside along with part of his wages for hiring legal counsel and building a home for Teddy. Kingsley had informed him someone had authorized the payments to be stopped because Remus was a werewolf; Kingsley had traced it back to one of Umbridge's toadies, who had promptly been sacked.

Remus asked Hermione if she would help him do research on the weekends to see if there were any specific legal prohibitions against a werewolf raising a child alone that Andromeda could use against him, and he began scanning the real estate ads in the newspaper to get an idea of what was available and how much he needed to save. He also wrote to Andromeda once more, informing her of his intentions to fight for Teddy; he wasn't surprised when that letter was returned unopened as well, but at least she couldn't say he hadn't tried to warn her.

"There's a quicker solution to this, you know," Harry remarked when he came into the library one Saturday while Remus and Hermione were there, surrounded by stacks of books.

Remus stretched a kink out of his back and turned toward Harry. "Oh, really? What is it?"

"Well, you've got two Aurors, a former Death Eater, and the Minister of Magic on your side," Harry pointed out. "If you didn't sign anything that gave away your rights, then what's stopping you from asking us to go with you to get your son back?"

Remus sat in silence, dumbstruck for a moment. "I... hadn't thought of that," he admitted.

"Perhaps it's time you did," Kingsley said, amusement lacing his deep voice, and Remus widened his eyes.

"Are all of you already here?" he asked, and a chorus of "yes'es was the reply, and a moment later, he felt Severus' presence behind him and the weight of Severus' hand on his shoulder. "But I haven't got a house yet."

"You can stay here until you've saved up enough for a house of your own," Harry replied. "Look, you're *not* imposing, okay? I'd like to get to know my godson, you know, and this house is big enough for all of us. There's even a furnished nursery upstairs. It probably hasn't been used since Sirius and Regulus were kids, but we can fix it up."

"Mum said she'd help you," Ginny piped up. "We can organize the nursery so you know where everything is, just like in your office, and you'll have us and Lizzie and Ethan to help out until you get used to changing nappies and all that stuff on your own."

"Don't be an idiot," Severus said, squeezing Remus' shoulder. "You have resources that will allow you to take custody of your son *now*, not some uncertain time in the future. You should use them."

Laughing, Remus closed the book in front of him and pushed it aside. "Well, then, will you lot - all of you - come with me to get my son back?"

Much later, Remus stood in the nursery at Grimmauld Place, Teddy an unfamiliar but welcome weight in his arms, and marveled over how quickly things could change. He didn't want to put Teddy in the crib, in case he returned and found the crib empty and Teddy's return to be nothing but a dream.

"Tell me what she looked like," he said as Severus slid one arm around his waist from behind, and

he leaned back against Severus, happily sandwiched between his two favorite people.

"Livid." Severus' voice was laced with unconcealed glee, and Remus chuckled as he trailed his fingers lightly over Teddy's face, re-learning his features. "Her face turned red, and she looked ready to hex all of us where we stood. That was when she began shrieking."

Kingsley and Harry had stepped forward at that point, and Kingsley had calmly reminded her that Remus was Teddy's biological father and his legal guardian, and they were prepared to take legal action and even take the matter public if she didn't cooperate. She had capitulated quickly after that, and while Severus hadn't mentioned that she had begun to cry, Remus had heard the soft, hitching breaths that preceded tears, and he had spoken up.

"I won't keep you from him," he said. "As long as you don't try to take him away from me again, you may visit him whenever you like."

After that, they had packed up Teddy's things and departed, and there had been a celebratory lunch at Grimmauld Place followed by a whirlwind cleaning and refurbishing of the nursery; Lizzie stood beside Remus and described what was going on, but even that didn't help make much sense out of the chaotic sounds of movement and laughter he heard. Redecorating became a group effort; even Kingsley had pitched in, adding a touch of his own in the form of repairing a tattered Mother Goose wall hanging and embellishing it with Ravenclaw colors, while Severus and Harry battled it out over who could add more green and silver versus red and gold around the room. Ginny and Ron had assisted Harry, of course, but Hermione had earned their dismayed protests by helping Severus and Kingsley in equal measure.

"Well, they're outnumbered," she had pointed out, much to Remus' amusement, although he privately agreed with her sense of fair play.

Now everyone had gone their own ways, leaving Remus, Teddy, and Severus alone in the nursery while Remus waited for the realization that this was real to sink in. Severus stood behind Remus with one arm around Remus' waist while Remus leaned against him, holding Teddy close.

"Will this change anything?" Remus asked, a hint of apprehension in his voice, and Severus gave him a little squeeze.

"I don't think so," Severus replied. "I have little experience with infants, but I consider having good sex on a regular basis incentive enough to learn."

Laughing, Remus tipped his head back and pursed a kiss up at Severus. "Fair enough. I'll just have to make certain the sex continues to be a good incentive."

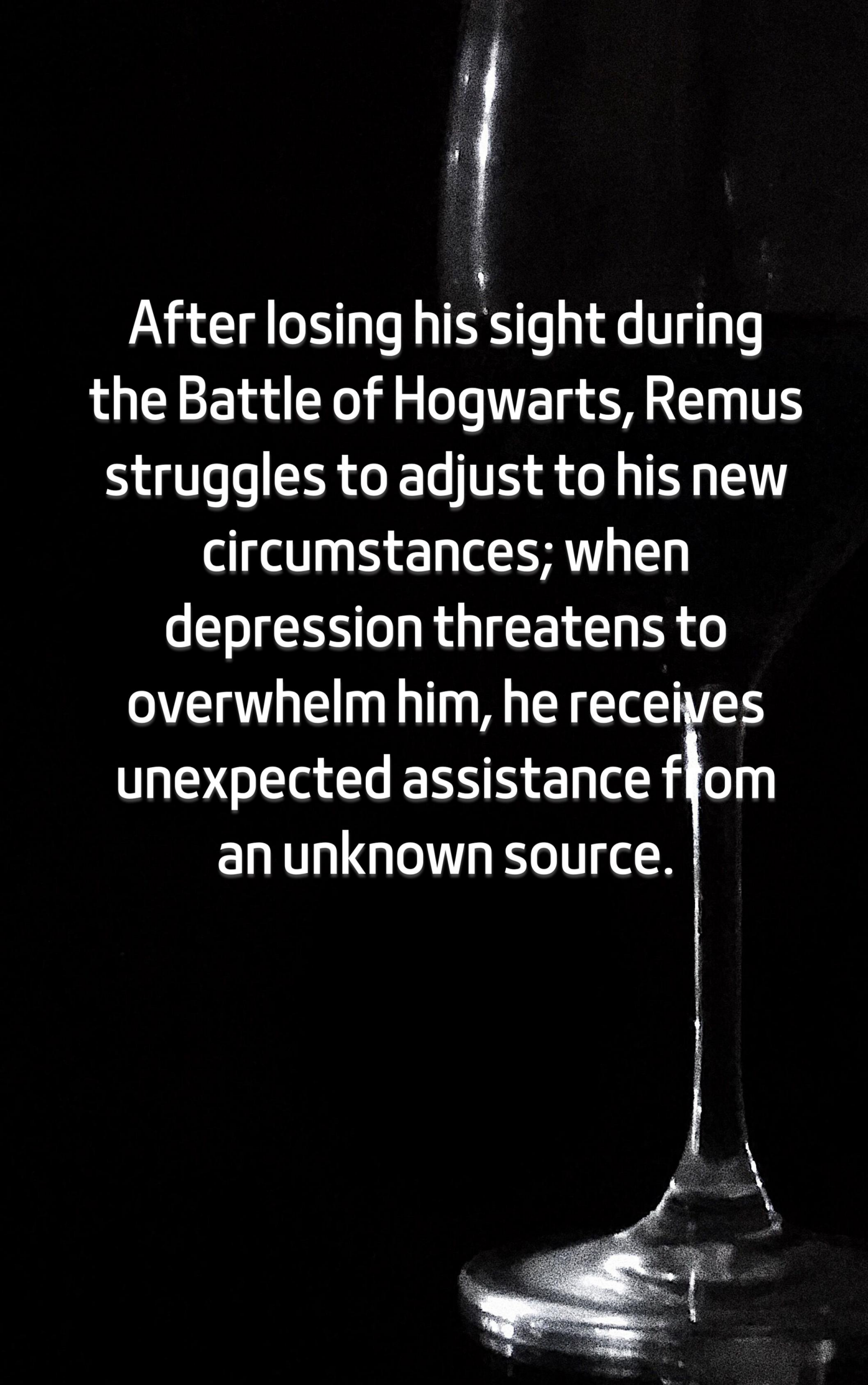
"I have little doubt on that point." Severus paused for a moment before adding, "Would you like some time alone with your son?"

"No." Remus shook his head and smiled up at Severus before turning his attention back down to Teddy, listening with pleasure and pride to each soft baby breath. "There's plenty of time for that later. Right now, I like this. Us."

There was a long pause, long enough for Remus to wonder if he'd said the wrong thing or pushed too hard, but then he felt Severus' other arm steal around his waist, felt himself pulled closer.

"Yes." Severus' voice was soft and deep, his breath ghosting past Remus' ear. "Us."

Remus relaxed in Severus' embrace, feeling far more than merely content; he felt *happy*. For the first time since losing his sight, his future looked very bright indeed.



After losing his sight during the Battle of Hogwarts, Remus struggles to adjust to his new circumstances; when depression threatens to overwhelm him, he receives unexpected assistance from an unknown source.